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HANNES BOK

THE MAN ON THE METEOR

A classic book-length science-fiction novel by

RAY CUMMINGS

also

R. R. WINTERBOTHAM

MARTIN PEARSON

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED — THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!











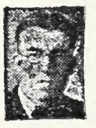


I Trained These Men



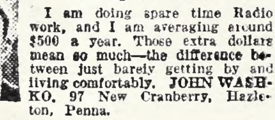
Chief Operator Broadcasting Station

Before I completed your lessons, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined Station WMPC where I am now Chief Operator. HOLLIS F. HAYES, 327 Madison St., Lapeer, Michigan.



Service Manager for Four Stores

I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. I am now Radio Service Manager for the M——— Furniture Co. for their four stores. – JAMES E. RYAN, 119 Pebble Court, Fall River, Mass.



$10 a Week Extra In Spare Time

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In U. S. Signal Corps

I am in the U. S. Army, Signal Corps, as Chief Radio Clerk. My duties also include maintenance of the transmitter and receivers when the Chief Radio Operator is absent. R. W. ANDERSON, Radio Station WTI, Vancouver Barracks, Washington.

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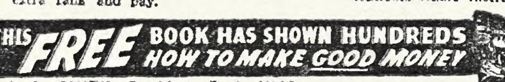
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FUTURE

combined with SCIENCE FICTION

Volume 2, Number 1 — **October, 1941**

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SPECIAL FEATURES

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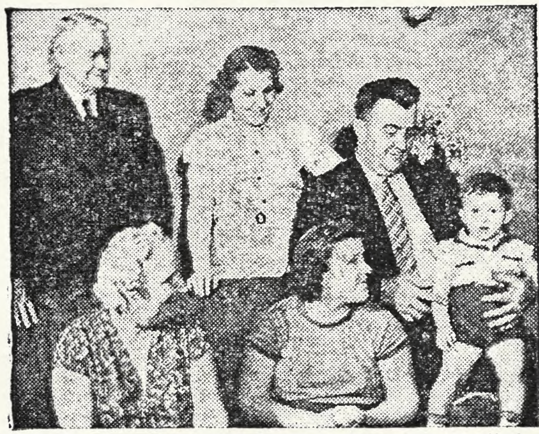
(From a scene in "Pogo Planet")

FUTURE COMBINED WITH SCIENCE FICTION, published every other month by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices, 60 Hudson St., New York, N. Y. Application for second class matter pending at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass. Yearly subscription 75c. Printed in the U. S. A.

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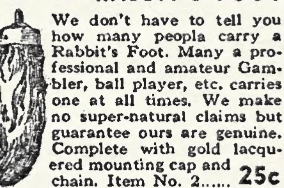
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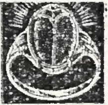
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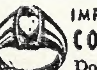
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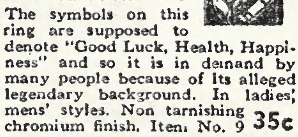
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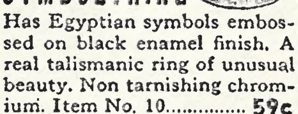
Down in Puerto Rico they tell many incredible legends about the Corozo Nut. It is worn as a love charm or amulet. This ring is actually hand-carved from the nut and inlaid with real mother of pearl. Item No. 3 **75c**



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THE MAN ON THE METEOR

by RAY CUMMINGS

(Author of "Tarrano, the Conqueror", "The Exile of Time", etc.)

Alone on this strange little world in the orbit of Saturn, the man who knew himself as Nemo, and the golden haired girl who called herself Nona, lived the lives of simple primitives. But weird was this planetoid where rocks burned and the water was fit to breathe, yet no less fantastic than the meteor itself was the bizarre Marinoid people who dwelt deep in its waters! A tale to remember.

CHAPTER I

I DO NOT know where I was born. I am ignorant of the country—I do not even know on which world it was.

I shall tell you my history exactly as I remember it.

The first recollection that I have was when I was a young man at the full height of my physical strength. Let us say, I was twenty, with dark hair and eyes, a slender body, but muscular and powerful. The day I have in mind is clear to my memory now —but everything that happened to me be-

A COMPLETE CLASSIC SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL



"With my slight weight, I could lift huge masses of stone."

fore it is a blank. I found myself lying on the ground. It was dark and there was a sky full of stars and strange flashing lights.

I sat up, stiff and sore, and bruised all over. I was encased in some sort of a rubber suit, with a pack on my back; my head was enclosed in a helmet of transparent, rigid material.

I felt as though I were smothering; and I tore off the helmet and flung it from me. I drank in a deep breath of the night air. It was pure and sweet, but heady. It made my senses reel like some potent wine.

I say that I sat up. That is not strictly true. I pushed my elbow against the ground, and my whole body went into the air. I floated back to a sitting posture. I was light as a feather!

The night was calm without a breath of air stirring——Lucky for me for I would have blown away had there been any wind! I sat there puzzling over my very existence. I knew nothing, not even my own name. I have since named myself Nemo.

This place where I found myself that starry night showed a barren landscape with only a few queerly-shaped, stunted trees. The horizon was very close to me—almost at hand, in fact—for the ground was curved with an enormous convexity.

It was, indeed, as though I were clinging to the top of a ball, whirling through Space. The stars were swinging across the sky with visible movement.

I had been conscious no more than a minute when a moon swung into view. Then

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another. And then, without warning, a million tiny worlds flashing silver with reflected sunlight, burst up from below the horizon and swarmed the heavens. Behind them I saw a tremendous, glowing silver sphere, with dark bands upon it—a sphere so large that as it rose it almost filled the sky.

I was on a tiny meteor—one of the myriad that swarm in circular orbits about the planet Saturn and form its rings.

Saturn, in position outward from the Sun, is the sixth major planet of the Solar System. Its mean distance from the Sun is 887,098,000 miles. It is a globe almost as large as Jupiter—74,163 miles in diameter, to be exact. It has, however, a trifle less than half Jupiter's density and only one-ninth the density of the Earth.

With Saturn's rings you are perhaps familiar in a general way. They are concentric, and encircle the planet like a flat hat-brim—a brim more than 37,000 miles broad. These rings are composed of billions upon billions of tiny meteors revolving about Saturn all in almost the same plane and each maintaining its separate orbit—each a tiny satellite, each glowing silver from its reflected sunlight.

And it was upon one of these tiny meteors that I found myself. Do not imagine that I knew all these facts at the moment. Far from it. I had no knowledge of any kind. My body was developed to manhood but I was ignorant of everything with only instinct and a dawning reason to guide me.

I had tossed away my transparent helmet. It left my hand and went through the air like a stone from a catapult. The last I saw of it it was sailing out over a line of trees. My brain was still confused but I knew that my body was over-warm. I took off the rubber garment and pack, finding myself in a white knitted affair like a bathing suit—sleeveless shirt and trunks.

I stood up unsteadily, and found that I had just enough weight to maintain my footing. My head was reeling, I suppose, largely because of the quality of the air.

Air, you say! Air on a meteor like that! Do you call yourself an astronomer? If so, you show your ignorance by such questioning. Air, or at least something that served my purposes of breathing, was there and that I am here alive to tell it must be your proof.

I could see perhaps a quarter of a mile. The land curved away, dropping down in every direction so that the sky at the horizon showed seemingly below the level of my feet. I was visibly on the top of the world.

Overhead those billions of tiny worlds were swarming. Sometimes fragments of star-dust would enter my atmosphere—flaming red shooting stars, burning themselves out in an instant. And behind everything hung that gigantic silver ball that was Saturn.

The whole firmament was swinging sidewise. In a few moments half of Saturn was below my horizon. The Sun rose behind me—a smaller Sun than appears to you here on Earth, but still the same yellow-red color.

It was daylight, with the Sun mounting toward the zenith so quickly in less than an hour it would be there, and my day would be half over.

I saw myself now to be standing on a slight rise of black, sandy ground. There were metallic rocks lying about, a low, scanty vegetation in patches on the ground—vegetation of a bluish color; and flimsy, stunted trees. These had broad, angular blue-white trunks with spreading tops ten feet up, and foliage that was bluish-white. Behind me was a jagged, metallic peak perhaps a hundred feet in height.

There was no water in sight, no sign of life of any kind. Quite suddenly I discovered that I was both hungry and thirsty.

What was I to do? This world was so small I could have started walking in any direction and come back to my starting point in a very short time. Walking! It was impossible to walk! I weighed almost nothing. I stood teetering on tip-toe, straining every muscle to maintain my balance, feeling like a balloon poised ready to sail away.

I took a step forward. Under the impulse of my gentle leg-thrust, my body rose into the air in a broad arc. I suppose I went up a hundred feet, sailing forward toward the line of trees at the horizon. I lost my balance; my arms and legs were flying. I floated gently down and landed on my face near the base of a tree!

You smile! I assure you it was not humorous to me. I stood up again, trembling with surprise and alarm. A new vista of land beyond the former horizon had opened. I saw other little jagged peaks a few hundred feet away and behind them, over that dizzying curve downward of the world, was the azure of cloudless Space.

I was frightened, and now I know it was

with good reason. Had I leaped recklessly into the air I might have left my tiny world entirely—escaped from its slight gravitation sufficiently to become its satellite, or perhaps even completely to depart its vicinity and become a satellite of Saturn!

This tiny world upon which I found myself was inhospitable to the extreme; and yet if I had been conscious of the choice, I would not have wanted to abandon it for empty Space. Out there, worse than suffering hunger and thirst, I would not be able to breathe.

Whatever my life before this day may have been, walking evidently was part of it. I know that because my instinct was to walk. I decided to weigh myself down with rocks and thus be able to maintain a footing. Futile conception! I seized a huge rock of black metallic quartz in each hand—only to find that the rocks themselves were mere feathers in my grasp! Angered, I flung them into the air. They sailed away, out over the horizon. Undoubtedly they left my world never to return.

The Sun was now past the zenith. It was mid-afternoon. Shortly it would be night again.

I was clinging to the tree-trunk for support, when quite near me I saw what seemed to be the mouth of a cave. I was staring at it when a figure appeared from below. I did not move, and this thing evidently did not see me.

It was a girl, fashioned in human form like myself. She stood there cloaked in the long waving masses of her hair. I must have made some slight sound for after a moment she looked my way. I caught a glimpse of a beautiful oval face framed in the golden tresses, lips full and red, eyes blue, wide now with fear.

Without warning, she left the ground. She went swiftly past me, lying in the air gracefully on one side, her arms moving rhythmically. She was swimming in the air with all the grace and skill of a mermaid!

I stood spellbound. In a moment she had passed over the curve of the world and disappeared.

CHAPTER II

CAN I SAY that the sight of this girl inspired in me any emotion stronger than my passions of hunger and thirst? Not so. I was in the full bloom of my manhood, yet the sight of this beautiful woman thrilled me because now I knew instinctively I might find food and water.

I scrambled forward, holding myself to the ground with difficulty, and entered the mouth of her cave like some marauding animal seeking the sustenance I craved.

The cave-mouth gave into a tunnel leading at an angle downward. The walls were smooth. I forced myself down, half sliding, half gently falling. For an instant the thought came to me that I would encounter other living creatures—things to keep me from the food and drink I wanted. Had I met them—humans or beasts—I know I should have fought desperately.

It was dark in the tunnel; but soon I saw that the rocks were glowing with a phosphorescence. This grew brighter as I advanced.

I went down perhaps two hundred feet; then the tunnel opened. I was in a subterranean chamber of indeterminate size, possibly five hundred feet square, with a black rocky ceiling some fifty feet above me. The whole place was dimly lighted by the red-silver glow which came from the rocks. The air was denser, with a pungent, aromatic odor. It seemed to strengthen me and clear my head.

The sides of the cave were rough and broken with overhanging rocks like shelves. Here and there were other small tunnel-mouths. Most important of all, a small subterranean stream crossed the cave, opening up into a little lagoon near the center. It was a thin-looking, milk-white fluid. I flung myself down to it with a splash.

It tasted, not like milk, but like pure, cold water, though very thin and light. I drank my fill. The joy of it!

There was a pile of blue fabric—woven grass—on the bank beside the stream. The girl's couch, it proved to be. The robes were very soft, gossamer in weight. I started to dry myself upon one of them. But the water—I shall call it that—evaporated like alcohol, and I was dry in a moment.

There was food here. A patch of black soil had queer, fungus-like growths in it. I had no doubt it was the girl's food. There were the remains of a fire, though I did not know what it was at the time. On a stone was some of the fungus which had been cooked. Of this I ate.

Upon the couch I lay at ease. The blue robes lay around me like swan's down. My slight weight made me seem floating in

them. It was my first conscious moment of physical peace.

WITH hunger and thirst appeased my thoughts turned to the girl. She was not only the first woman, but, to my memory, the first living thing I had ever seen. Where was she now? Could I capture her?

Across the cave I saw something move. The mouth of a passageway was there beyond the stream; and in the dim glow of light I could make out the girl standing there. She was watching me as I lay in possession of her couch.

I held myself motionless. After a moment she began coming forward, timidly, yet curiously to inspect me. She stopped at the edge of the stream no more than fifty feet away. Her hair fell in waves to her knees. She stood hesitating, frightened, yet drawn by a power greater than her fear. I could see the muscles of her limbs tensed for instant flight.

I had intended to leap suddenly across the stream but a strange shyness came over me. Intsead, I called to her. Words? I had no spoken language. I called some syllable. It startled her; but she answered—a soft little call of shy friendliness.

I wanted her to come to my side of the stream, but she would not. I beckoned to her; but she moved backward on fairy-like tip-toed steps. It angered me. I waved my arm vehemently and tried to climb to my feet, struggling with the airy, half-floating robes of the couch.

The girl took flight. Her arms struck out, and like a swimmer mounting through water she floated up to the ceiling, landing upon a ledge of rock. Through a tangle of her hair her face peered down at me. And though her eyes were frightened, there semed an impish, mocking expression to her tremulous smile.

Shyness dropped from me. She would obey me; I would make her. I kicked myself into the air and swam as I had seen her swim. But it was not as easy as it looked. I turned over in the air, losing my balance in spite of myself.

I reached the ledge, striking my shoulder violently upon it as I landed in a heap. But she was not there. Across the cave, down by the couch she stood poised on tiptoe, looking at me. And this time her red mouth and dancing eyes were openly mocking.

For half an hour I pursued her about the cave; but she eluded me as easily as though she had been a butterfly and I one of your Earth-children in eager chase. She could have escaped from the cave, but she had no fear of me now. At last, bruised and exhausted by my futile efforts, I sank upon her couch; and again she stood nearby, regarding me.

I was angry and sulky. I pretended to disregard her. At last, utterly worn out, I fell asleep.

CHAPTER III

WHEN I awoke, the girl was sitting beside me. Her soft fingers had been stroking my hair; it was their touch which awakened me. As I moved and opened my eyes, she instantly withdrew beyond my reach.

I was hungry and when I motioned to her and indicated the food, she seemed to understand. I sat quite still, and within a few minutes she was deftly preparing a meal. But I was aware that she watched me narrowly and seldom came within my reach.

The fire she produced by rubbing two stones together. It seemed to ignite the stones, with a tiny flickering flame like the burning of sulphur. She had gathered a pile of dried vegetation from the surface above the cave; and when that was blazing she added rocks that glowed like coal. The fire interested me tremendously. It alarmed me; but only at first, for I saw that the girl had no fear of it.

I need not go into details. Her manner was proud when presently she indicated the hot food ready to eat and she watched me expectantly while I tasted it. I smiled my approval and beckoned her to take some of it with me. At which she curled up on the robe beside me, eating the food I pushed toward her.

We were friends. Like myself, she had no spoken language. But when we tried to talk it came fast. I indicated myself and told her I was Nemo. The word seemed to spring readily to my mind; I have no doubt it was some part of my earlier life. She had no name. I called her Nona. It seemed to please her. She repeated it after me half a dozen times, and clapped her hands delightedly.

A little later we went up to the surface of our tiny world. It chanced to be day-

light; and Nona taught me how to swim through the air, how to handle myself against this lack of gravity.

The art came to me quickly. I was soon able to swim about with swift, powerful strokes. My stronger muscles gave me an advantage over her. I could swim more quickly; but I could never attain her deftness, her agility. She would swoop about, dive head downward in a graceful arc, right herself and land on tip-toe.

We circled our little globe, swimming at an altitude of a hundred feet, and following the Sun; and within half an hour were back at our starting point. Everywhere I saw the same bleak landscape. It was night when we returned, for we had overtaken the Sun and passed it. But in a few moments daylight came again.

Then Nona showed me how to jump. With arms folded, she leaped vertically into the air. Straight up her body shot, her hair brushed flat against her by the downward rush of wind. She held herself upright by throwing out a hand occasionally. Like an arrow she mounted; until standing on the ground I could see her only as a tiny dark speck against the blue of the sky.

She came swimming down a few moments later, her hair waving like a cloak behind her, spun gold with the sunlight on it. She was laughing and flushed from the exertion.

Then at arm's length with fingers clasped, we leaped upward together. The tiny world dropped away. Looking down, it showed itself as a ball. I could see far around it.

We seemed to mount endlessly. The air grew so rare I gasped for breath. My head was roaring. I was cold. Below, I could see the spherical meteor turning under us. We were in Space, no longer a part of our world. And we had almost reached the limit of its atmosphere.

Nona's fingers clutched mine tightly. Suddenly she twisted me downward and dropped me. A strong side wind had sprung up. We swam down against it, fighting our way until we at last were back to the meteor's surface.

I was tired, for through my clumsiness I had used far more energy than Nona; but I would not let her see it. I saw her look upon the muscles of my arms and shoulders, and her admiration pleased me. I stretched my arms for her, showed her the muscles of my legs; and looked about for some way of displaying my prowess. There were many boulders around that could be loosened. One by one I flung them into the air, sent them into Space never to return.

NONA watched me with awe, encouraging me with little syllables of pleasure as I selected larger and larger rocks. Some I dug up and tore loose, until at last I ripped off the top and side of a hill. It was a mountain of rock. I staggered like Atlas, with it over my head, and then launched it into the air. It rose a short distance, and fell back to form another hill.

Nona gazed at me with new respect and with a look in her eyes that made my heart pound. I was casting about for some larger burden, but she drew me away.

I was pleased. A sense of my own power filled me. I was master here on this world of mine. I could have taken it apart bit by bit and tossed it into Space. I could tear down mountains, build others in their stead.

Facts and figures? I am in a position now to give them to you. My meteor had a diameter of five miles, a circumference of some fifteen. Its density relative to Earth was .67. Its surface gravity—again relative to your Earth—was .00039, placing Earth as 1.00. My weight at the surface of my meteor—neglecting other factors which I shall name in a moment—was slightly over one ounce.

Without undue exertion I could leap upward nearly ten thousand feet—that is to say, almost two miles. And the mountain of rock I tossed into the air on your Earth would have weighed some 320,000 pounds!

I have said that the boulders I tossed upward left the surface of the meteor never to return. At an initial velocity of 13 feet a second, all objects became satellites of the meteor, revolving about it comparatively close to the surface in perfect circles. The velocity of escape was but 18½ feet a second, i. e., that velocity which would cause an object to pass into outer Space, moving onward until it found some larger body to encircle.

I give these figures without corrections for atmosphere, axial rotation of the meteor, or the attraction of other bodies. Theoretically they are accurate, though in practice they were altered somewhat. During our brief days we weighed more than I have stated; while at night, less. Indeed, had we essayed a jump into the air at night,

we should doubtless have been unable to struggle our way back.

How can that be, you ask? Our proximity to Saturn! Around this great planet we were revolving at a distance of no more than thirty-five thousand miles. Saturn's surface gravity is a trifle greater than that of your earth—1.07 to be exact. Saturn's density is only one-ninth that of the Earth; but the difference is made up because of its tremendous size. Saturn's gravity—to us on the meteor—was an appreciable pull, even though diminished by the distance between us, and further offset by the meteor's rapid rotation.

Thus, you see, when Saturn was below us—in daytime—its gravity was added to ours. But at night, when it was in the sky above, it was subtracted.

These conditions applied to the days I am describing. Our meteor was then between Saturn and the Sun. Later in our year, when we had passed around Saturn, the Sun was blotted out. There was then no daylight—merely alternate periods of a sky filled with Saturn's silver disk and the azure, star-filled outer Space.

I have not mentioned the time of our meteor's axial rotation. It was, as you on Earth measure time, 2 hours, 58 minutes. A complete day and night in less than three hours!

When I had finished showing Nona my strength, it was night again. And such a night! Saturn no more than thirty-five thousand miles away! The darkened bands were plainly visible. When fully overhead, the circular limb of the planet came down in all directions almost to our horizon. The silver light from it was dazzling. And everywhere in the sky, meteors like ourselves were whirling past—silver in Space, flaming red when fragments of them struck our atmosphere.

Occasionally a meteorite would strike our surface, but we had no fear of them. For an hour perhaps, we stood together, silent, gazing with awe at these mysteries of the sky. Until at last Nona gently drew me back to her cave.

CHAPTER IV

WITHIN the cave the air seemed warmer than before, perhaps because I was flushed and tired from my exertion. The radiant light from the rocks was soft. Here all was quiet and peace.

At once I threw myself upon Nona's couch, stretching my limbs, head pillowed upon my crooked arm. For a time, as before she stood regarding me. There was in her gaze now no fear, but a curious softness. I sensed it. With sudden thought she smiled, and swam across the cave. She got a stone, hollowed out like a cup. She filled it at the stream and offered it to me. I drank gratefully.

Again I was conscious of hunger. The fungus-like food was unsatisfying. I made Nona understand, and she seemed distressed. I could see she wanted to feed me but had no other food.

Finally she motioned me to lie quiet. I watched her as she stretched herself prone on the ground near me. Her head was raised; she was looking keenly, carefully about the cave. Then she began swimming, slowly, stealthily, no more than a foot or two above the cave floor, circling about, up along the walls, back overhead following the line of the ceiling.

Once, when she was hovering over by the side wall, I saw her grow suddenly alert. I followed her steady gaze; and on a rock fifty feet from her I made out the outlines of something lying motionless. It looked like a lizard some three feet long, with white eyes standing out from its forehead. It was because of the eyes that I first saw it.

Nona was in midair. Then, like a wasp she darted at that thing on the rock.

The lizard—I shall call it that—saw her coming. It leaped, and sailed across the cave. I saw it that it had webbed membranes connecting its six outstretched legs.

Nona turned in the air after it, her slim body as sinuous as her waving hair itself. She was faster than the lizard, but again, on the opposite side of the cave, it eluded her.

Back and forth across the cave they went. Often the reptile would dash for one of the passageways but Nona with her greater intelligence, always anticipated it and was there to bar its way.

The lizard seemed jointed all over, and it could turn in the air with extraordinary swiftness. But not so swift as Nona. Once the reptile whirled back and forth on a sustained flight. Nona followed its every twist and turn as one bird follows another.

At last she had it in her arms, in midair at the center of the cave. Calling to me in

triumph, she struggled with it, fighting her way down to the ground.

I started toward her, but her voice and gesture waved me away. The lizard was screaming—a shrill, hideous scream. But she had its back bent across her knee. Its spine broke with a crack. It lay still.

By one foreleg she held its quivering body up to me; she was laughing with happiness as she sought my applause.

We ate the meat of its tail and legs; and satiated, I lay somnolent on the robes and watched Nona moving about the cave. She extinguished the fire, and at last approached me timidly. I did not notice her. My eyes were half closed. I was vaguely planning my own hunting for food—wondering if there would be other reptiles larger, for me to capture.

A twitch at the coverings on which I was lying aroused me. Nona was pulling a robe out from under me for herself. I pushed it toward her.

I did not move. It was very soundless in the cave with only the murmuring of the stream. Nona curled up on her robe near me. Thus we lay silent; but I felt her shy gaze always upon me and suddenly I came back to complete wakefulness.

We stared wordlessly at each other until her gaze timidly dropped. With heart racing, I moved myself slowly toward her. I was afraid to frighten her; but she moved, not away, but to me. Abruptly my arms were around her.

Thus I found my habitable world and my mate—beyond which the legitimate needs of man do not go.

THE days that followed were happy ones for us both. We lived in our cave and seldom left it. The securing of food, preparing it, eating it, and sleeping until we were hungry again—this was our life.

Animals, yet both of us with the latent intelligence of civilized human beings! Our spoken language came very fast. We seemed to be pent up with words, which once spoken were remembered almost without conscious effort. So it is with your Earth-children who are the despair of their parents because sometimes they do not talk until they are almost two years old. They have it stored up—and when they do give voice, their fluency is amazing.

Our language? I cannot tell you what it was; I do not know. It seemed almost as though we were inventing it as we went along.

Nona, in her spiritual and mental existence, was the counterpart of myself. Who she was, where she had come from—those questions she could not answer. Her mental life had started on the meteor with herself almost a matured woman. One's mental life, you will realize, is dependent exclusively upon memory. And Nona's memory previous to the time of our meeting was short and dim. Perhaps human memory only exists with spoken language—or social intercourse of a similar kind. I do not know. Even your hermit speaks, or has spoken to his fellow man.

Time passed. How much time I cannot say. A month—five months perhaps. Time is as inconstant as the wind itself, as you would very soon perceive were you to live in semi-darkness, eating when you could get the food, sleeping when you were tired—and with no mechanical timepiece or its equivalent to measure arbitrarily your passing existence.

The securing of a steady and varied supply of food gave us trouble. The day came when we could not capture a lizard. The fungus-like stuff Nona was growing I had begun heartily to dislike. I had searched every corner of the cave and its passageways for a lizard and had come back unsuccessful.

Nona had started a fire and was sitting beside it drying her hair. Water was evaporating from her shoulders; she had been in the stream. A few molluscs, or something of the kind, lay at her feet.

"See!" she cried triumphantly. "They are to eat. My man Nemo can get them—they are in the water."

I broke them open and ate one. It was good. I kissed her approvingly and her arms clung about my neck. Nona always was happiest in my approbation; she seemed to think of nothing save how to win it.

When her caresses were passed, I stood up.

"How do I get them?" I demanded. "Nona must show me once—then I will get very many of them for us to eat."

Nona led me to the stream and we waded into it waist-deep. I had bathed here, but I had never been further along. Nona had, however. She led me forward to where the water went under a low archway of our cave and thence into the bowels of the meteor.

The river-bed under my feet began sloping downward. The water deepened around me—to my chest, shoulders, almost to my neck. I was terrified. I pulled back from Nona's hand which was drawing me along. Her hair was floating out like golden seaweed around us. The milk-white water was under her uptilted chin.

Her eyes smiled at me tenderly. "No," she said. "My man Nemo never can he be afraid."

Afraid! I could not let her see that. I grunted scornfully, and we went forward.

The water rose to my own chin. We were well underground now—the ceiling of this subterranean passageway was hardly a foot above my head. In front of me I could see where the ceiling touched the water.

Suddenly I remembered Nona. One of her hands still held mine—the other was braced against a projection of the side wall to hold us against the gentle current that pressed us forward. The water now almost reached the top of her head. I could see her face beneath the surface. Her mouth was opened round and wide; a stream of air bubbles came gurgling up from it. Her chest was expanding and contracting rhythmically and swiftly, seemingly with great effort, like a man panting after an exhausting run. *She was breathing the water!*

CHAPTER V

I STARED at Nona silently. The air bubbles from her mouth grew less, until soon there were almost none of them. The tidal air in her lungs had been forced out; water had taken its place. Through her opened mouth she was drawing in the water and expelling it—rapid respirations taxing the intercostal muscles almost to their limit.

Nona smiled up at me through the water, which in spite of its milk-white color, was curiously limpid and transparent. I felt the tug of her hand; I stepped forward, and in the deepening water my face went under.

Whatever may have been my previous existence, an experience such as this quite evidently was no part of it. My instinct was to hold my breath. I did so until I could no longer. I struggled against Nona's hand and tried to get my head above the surface. But she held me; and my fear of having her know me to be afraid was greater than my fear of the water.

At last I let out my pent-up breath. It gurgled from my mouth in bubbles. Then, in a gulp of desperation, I inhaled. The water choked me. I tried to cough; but could not—or at least the cough became my exhalation.

My ears were roaring as though the torrents of your Niagara were rushing past them. My head and chest seemed bursting—icy-cold at first, then burning with fire.

My eyes were open. I was standing beside Nona and she was looking up at me. Through the half-light of the water I could see her almost as plainly as through air. She smiled encouragingly at me, and I tried to smile back.

I was drawing the water in and out swiftly now, with my mouth held extended like an expiring fish. It was a tremendous effort, this respiration. The muscles of my chest and diaphragm were tired in a moment. A weight in my chest seemed smothering my heart; I seemed on fire inside—a million inflamed little lung passages rebelling at this unaccustomed medium.

Spots were dancing before my eyes. I was losing consciousness through lack of oxygen. The poisoned venous blood was dulling my brain.

Then I began to feel better. I was respiring now almost as swiftly as Nona, and with far less effort than I had used at first.

YOU are skeptical? Because *you* cannot breathe your Earth-water, you assume that *I* could not breathe this water on my meteor. What quaint logic that is! Yet I find all you Earth-people think on similar lines. It is your inadequate mentality, I suppose, so I must hasten to enlighten you.

There are two fundamental objects of respiration. First: the introduction into the system of oxygen by which the products resulting from the disintegration of the muscular, nervous and other tissues of the body may be converted into compounds easily eliminated. Secondly: the direct removal of the most noxious and therefore most important of these waste products—carbonic acid gas.

In man, as you know him on Earth, this is accomplished by the lungs. The venous blood, charged with its carbonic acid and its waste products, needing a renewal of oxygen and a removal of the carbonic acid, is pumped by the heart through the lungs. These by their construction present an im-

mense amount of internal surface covered by a vascular network, through which the blood flows in innumerable minute streamlets.

In respiration, the inhaled air is separated from the blood only by an extraordinarily thin membrane—less than 1/20,000 of an inch in thickness. Through this membrane the blood absorbs oxygen from the air, giving in return to the air its noxious carbonic acid gas.

Such is the basic process in you Earthmen. In the case, let us say, of your Earthfishes breathing your water, there is little fundamental difference. The blood in their gills is brought practically into contact with a steadily moving stream of water. But fishes do not get their oxygen from the water in some mysterious fashion. Did you think they did? They get the oxygen, not from water, but from air—the air that is held in solution in the water.

But for two things, you on Earth could breathe your water. First, your lung passages are too minute to receive a substance so heavy, so *unvolatile,* let me say, as is the water of Earth. Secondly, there is not proportionally enough air in your water.

Both these conditions were different on my meteor.

This water on my meteor was very different from water as you know it. I have already said it was light and thin. To be exact, I estimate that on your Earth it would have a specific gravity of no more than .18, placing your water at 1.00.

In your sea-water a normally fleshy man will float with a small margin to spare. This water on my meteor was not saline; but more than that, Nona and I stood submerged in it with hardly any perceptible feeling of buoyancy.

Let me make my point still clearer. The low specific gravity of this water compared to yours was principally caused by the large amount of air it held in solution. It was, in a word, highly aerified to an extent proportionally eleven times more than is your average water on Earth. For this reason, my lungs needed but one-eleventh the amount of it from which to secure the necessary oxygen.

On Earth, your normal respiration varies widely; sixteen to twenty times per minute for a healthy adult at rest might be taken as a fair average. I was breathing this water at approximately eighty respirations per minute.

I DO NOT know how long I stood there under the surface with Nona before I attained semblance of normality. But gradually the burning in my chest and the smothering of my heart subsided. My brain cleared.

I looked about me curiously. The water was clear and transparent to a remarkable degree. There seemed inherent light diffused through it, like a phosphorescence.

We had taken several steps forward and were well below the surface now. Underneath my feet was a sandy soil. To the right and left were rocky walls—the sides of the submerged tunnel. And ahead lay open water, dim in the distance, with the narrow sandy floor sloping downward like a path down a hillside.

Everything was slightly blurred in outline. Nona's hair floated out and above her. The freedom of movement we had had in the air above was gone. We were hampered in moving by the friction of the water.

But it was nothing like the friction of walking in your water. Indeed, it was far more like your Earthly existence on land.

I am very specific in detailing these sensations. You will see why in a moment; you will see that this experience was the means of saving both our lives—Nona's and mine—and projecting us into a new era of my existence.

For after the very next time of sleep, the catastrophe to our tiny world overtook us.

CHAPTER VI

WE FOUND our molluscs and struggled back up the sloping path to shallow water. On the bank I lay and coughed, gasping and struggling to remove the residual water from my lungs and replace it with air. The transition back was far worse than entering the water. Nona, who quite evidently had done it several times before, recovered more quickly than I. As I lay panting and choking upon our couch, she made up a fire. The two stones which she rubbed together ignited in a moment—a slow, sulphurous-looking flame with a little smoke which the slight current of air through the cave carried away. Then, when the first stones were burning, she added other stones which glowed like coal.

We ate our meal, and I lay again upon our couch with Nona sitting beside me.

I was awakened by a sense of burning

and smothering. I sat up, coughed, and twitched at Nona's hair to arouse her.

The cave was full of smoke. Beside me was what seemed a pit of fire. The heat from it was intolerable. I flung Nona into the air and followed her myself with a leap.

Across the cave we stood trembling with fright, regarding the red monster of fire that had eaten for itself an open pit in the cave-floor.

Nona had forgotten to extinguish the fire of our evening meal. These rocks were inflammable. The fire had eaten its way downward, as a fire on your Earth would eat downward into a bed of coal, spreading out beneath the ground.

Nona and I did not reason it out that way at the time. All we knew was that the red fire-monster had broken loose, and we were afraid of it. Blue and red tongues of flame licked up from the mouth of its lair; its hot, poisonous breath was stifling us even across the cave.

I was inactive only for a moment. Bidding Nona keep away, I tried to throw dirt into the little crater-mouth.

But the dirt had no effect. I might have extinguished it with water you say? True, I might, though I think now that the volatile, highly aerated water would have been of little avail.

I did not try the water. I did not know that water and fire were traditional enemies. Nor did Nona. How were we to know that, unless we had chanced to discover it for ourselves, which we had not.

Nona screamed at me and I gave up my futile efforts. The air in the cave was almost suffocating; and with the instinct that comes to any trapped animal underground, we scrambled up the passageway to the surface of the meteor.

IT WAS night, with silver Saturn filling the overhead sky. Trembling, we stood and watched the cave-mouth from which a visible line of smoke was now issuing. Our home was down there; the fire-monster had it—and we could not go down and take it from him.

We never went back to the cave. The meteor's swift days and nights passed in rapid succession; and during several of them we stood helplessly watching.

Presently the fire came to the surface. I realize now that it was eating its way downward as well as upward until the entire vicinity of the cave was glowing with molten, burning rocks.

The ground all around the cave-mouth soon fell inward. A seething crater was exposed where the cave had been—a bottomless pit of lurid, licking flames with black smoke rolling up from it, and the hissing of steam below.

We took instant flight, swimming through the air over our tiny world, until, on its opposite hemisphere we found sanctuary.

There was no evidence of the fire here. We were pleased. We would find another cave, another river, and build our home anew.

We were both famished. I caught a lizard and we ate it—uncooked, for we were both afraid to unleash again the monster that had all but overcome us.

Then we slept; and again, when two of the meteor's brief days and nights were passed, and Saturn was sinking below the horizon to give place to dawning sunlight, we searched for a new cave.

No cave was to be found. But there was water. A river several hundred yards wide bubbled up from the ground and flowed in a broad shallow stream toward the horizon. We followed it to a tiny line of hills. Into a hole in a cliff-face it plunged downward with an impetuous current.

Here we decided to build our home. There were blue rushes along the river bank. Nona gathered them; she would dry them, plait them into robes for our couch.

Once I flew back to the fire. I could not get very close to it, for the air choked me. The fire seemed to be burning itself out. It was dull, with flickering puffs of flame in the midst of a thick pall of smoke which hung motionless in the still air.

I returned to Nona.

"The fire-monster is dying," I said. "But it has eaten our cave."

I KNOW now what was happening. The fire was being smothered for lack of fresh air to sustain its combustion. Had there been any wind I do not doubt but that the entire surface of the meteor would have been consumed.

An almost equally great danger threatened us, however—and presently we were made aware of it. The smothering, smouldering fire gave off steadily a tremendous volume of unconsumed gases. Even without any wind they diffused themselves throughout the meteor's atmosphere, it was so small

a world, with so thin a blanket of air about it—an infinitesimal fraction of the air that envelopes your Earth. Rapidly it became polluted with poisonous gases from the half-smothered fire—polluted throughout its entire extent.

For a day we were uneasy. Then we grew frightened. There was little evidence of smoke—only a blue haze. But the air seemed to choke us. It was the poisonous breath of the fire-monster come to make us sick.

We tried to go somewhere to escape it. But we were on the opposite side of the world from it already, and no matter which direction we took, inevitably we approached it.

Except upward. We tried higher altitudes. The air was purer up there, but also it was thinner, and we could not live in it for any length of time. Nor could we sustain ourselves aloft indefinitely—to say nothing of sleeping and eating.

Once in desperation we tried swimming, off the meteor into Space. But the lack of any breathable air at all soon brought us struggling downward.

That night there was a gentle wind. The breath of the fire-monster swept up over the horizon and came upon us with a deadly blast. We woke up, choking. It was daylight, with a small red-yellow sun dim and blurred by the poisonous haze that enveloped us.

Nona was crying. But suddenly I laughed, triumphantly, for I realized now that the fire-monster could not harm us.

We were lying at the river bank. I seized Nona in my arms and flung her headlong downward into the water. And I plunged in after her. The water here was deep—thirty feet perhaps, as you on Earth would measure it. With arms flying, we sank like stones to the river bottom.

CHAPTER VII

I WAS presently breathing the water with fair normality. Indeed, after the noxious air we had been struggling with so long, it came almost as a relief. Nona's arms were about my neck; I loosed them, but she clung to my hand. Together we tried to stand upright.

This river bottom seemed a gray sand. But we could not maintain footing. The water was empty—by which I mean there was no marine vegetation here—nothing that we could grip with our hands. And from behind us, the current wafted us gently but irresistibly forward.

I soon discovered that normally we would float in an upright position. We held ourselves so with our toes occasionally touching the soil, bouncing along like feathers in a gentle breeze.

The scene around us now more resembled a misty gray day on one of our sandy Earth-deserts than anything else I can call to mind. The ground was undulating gray sand, sloping upward to one side, and with a steady incline downward in front. And down this slope we were blowing.

Swim, you say? It never occurred to either of us! We were frightened; we clung to each other, striving to remain upright.

Very soon the light from overhead seemed to deepen. But other light—the diffused light inherent to the water itself—grew brighter by contrast. We were swept forward much faster—and down a much steeper hill. I know now that the change was caused by the river having plunged into that cliff-face, to become subterranean.

How far we were carried I cannot say. A mile perhaps. Or more. Rocky cliffs now seemed to pen us in; it was as though we were in a steep canyon, with a powerful wind driving us down through it.

Then abruptly we came to the end of the canyon. Open country lay before us. There were hills in the distance, with the level floor of the sea between us and them. Long stalks of vegetation reared themselves up through the water—so high that I could not see to their tops—slender spires of growing things, rooted below, branching out above with huge air-bladders to keep them floating—the whole waving slowly to and fro. On some of them there seemed what you might term fruit.

It was a strange, but a beautiful and peaceful scene. This, then, was our new home—our new world! And how much better, more hospitable, it was than the one we had left! My heart swelled with pride as, standing beside my mate, I gazed at our new possessions.

A small living thing—slender and elongated and with a flat, waving tail—went past us waist-high. I clutched at it clumsily; but it eluded me and darted away.

On the ground beneath our feet were

living things in shells. I seized one, ate it, and called to Nona.

Sounds? It was very still and quiet down here—but no more so than on the surface of the meteor above. The sound of my voice carried to Nona. Indeed, sounds here in the water carried very far, though somewhat muffled and blurred.

Having eaten of the shell-fish, the berries and the fruits, we lay down on the sand with Nona's hair floating above us. We were in the shelter of a tenuous clump of ferns which spread out like an arbor above us. I twisted my leg in them to hold us from possible drifting; and Nona clung to me.

We would rest and then build our home here.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW long we slept I do not know. Nona brought me back to consciousness; she was twitching at my arm and whispering in my ear frantically.

"What?" I demanded; but she silenced me. She was pointing with a trembling hand. I saw what it was. Half a mile away perhaps, over the sand hills, I could see figures moving. Living things were advancing toward us along the water-bottom!

I sat up, alert. Living things! I would capture and kill one for food.

But as they came steadily closer, I saw that each of them was nearly as large as ourselves—and there were ten or more of them. I trembled; and Nona and I drew back into the fern to hide.

The things continued to advance. Soon I saw that they were upright, coming along the sand as though walking, slowly but steadily. I thought they had not seen us. Nona and I lay very quiet, with our hearts pounding with fright. Soon the things were so close that I could examine them in detail. They were apparently human as ourselves—made after a general plan like our own.

I have since named them Marinoids—a name that may serve as well as any other. The males—or shall I call them men?—were some five feet in height. Their bodies were pink-white, smooth, with a glistening skin. They were clothed—crude greenish garments wrapped around them tightly. They had feet and jointed legs, which, however, were connected by a flapping membrane. Their chests were over-large. There were four arms, two at each shoulder. The arms waved in the water sinuously, like the tentacles of an octupus. At the ends of the arms were fingers—very long and slim—and a huge pincer, like that of a crab.

Yet for all that, these beings seemed in human form. The heads were hairy and round, with two eyes only slightly protruding, a nose, and a mouth not much different from my own save that it was larger.

The women were slightly shorter and more slender than the men, with long dark hair that floated habitually above them.

In this party which now approached us were ten individuals—four of them women. In spite of their size, there was about them—both women and men—a curious aspect of *unsolidity*. I felt less afraid of them as I realized it. They looked as though I could crush them in my arms. Their chests especially seemed no more than thin, inflated membranes, expanding and contracting with extraordinary rapidity.

I wondered, with a sudden flush of triumph, if these things would be good to eat. I whispered it to Nona.

"I can capture one," I said confidently.

"Wait!" she cautioned.

The Marinoids were still walking toward us along the sand—slow dragging footsteps combined with a sort of waddle for their legs were hampered by the membrane which connected them. Their arms were waving back and forth. The backs of most of them were bent, with their faces downward as though they were examining the sand.

I must have made some movement. They saw us! They stopped, and seemed to grow suddenly alert. The men consulted together, pointing at us; the women drew partially behind them as though for protection.

I struggled upright, in spite of Nona's warning and her restraining hold. I would fight these things—kill them for our food. It would be a glorious feast; my Nona was hungry.

I PLUNGED forward. The Marinoids were alarmed—startled would describe their aspect better. The men stood their ground; the women darted upward through the water, swimming on one side with legs waving the connecting membrane like a great fish's tail.

One of the Marinoid men had shouted something. I could hear his voice plainly—words seemingly—a rasping order. Nona was behind me, following me closely, ready to help me fight.

"Quick!" I shouted. "Catch one, Nona!"

It was so futile! The Marinoid men left the sand and darted at us so quickly that we could not have eluded them had we tried. They were upon us in an instant: I was helpless as they threw me down and with surprising strength in those three-foot long tentacles, wrapped them around me and held me.

Three of the men were thus engaged with me; and two were holding Nona. But they did not attempt to hurt us; indeed, they seemed to avoid doing so.

The sixth Marinoid—he who had shouted the order—was hastily gathering long, rope-like segments of the vegetation. At his command, Nona and I were raised upright. The women came down to the sand and they all inspected us curiously, talking among themselves with words to us unintelligible, but gestures which seemed wholly rational.

At last they bound our arms tightly against our sides and started us walking along the sand. They were leading us away, out over the sandy open spaces toward a line of hills in the distance.

The women swam above us; the men walked in a group, pushing Nona and me in front. We could run faster than they, and once we broke away. But they swam after us and caught us in an instant. And one of them warned us with a gesture which was unmistakable.

Soon I saw what this party had been doing before they encountered us. We passed occasionally, huge receptacles made seemingly of woven sea-vegetation. Into these baskets they had gathered various living, shell-backed creatures of the water-bottom. And these baskets in turn would be gathered up and carted away by other Marinoids.

I learned this later; Nona and I understood none of it at the time.

As we advanced, the aspect of things around us changed continually. The vegetation grew thicker, until soon we were in a veritable forest of it. And we seemed to be following a road—a pathway which had been cleared.

Abruptly I heard a shout ahead. The Marinoid women swimming above us came suddenly down. Our leader said something, and they all drew back from the road, pulling us with them.

The shout ahead of us grew louder. A moving object came into view—a sort of sleigh made of a huge shell. It was gliding over the sandy road toward us, pulled by a strange swimming animal.

In the sleigh were two Marinoid men—the larger of them elaborately clothed. The sleigh halted abreast of us. The smaller of its occupants stood up and shouted vehemently. And suddenly I realized that he was shouting at me! My captors were lying prone on the sand, and had pulled Nona down with them. But in their excitement and awe—for this was the ruler of their world—they had left me standing alone.

I stared stupidly at the angry figure in the sleigh; and suddenly, in his wrath at the effrontery of my upright posture before his Monarch, he launched something at me. I saw it leave his hand. It was long, thin and pointed. It came through the water like a spear thrown through the air. It hit my head a glancing blow.

I sank down to the sand. I heard shouts around me—Nona was screaming. Then my senses faded into blackness.

CHAPTER IX

I TAKE up my narrative at a point some four or maybe five months (as you here on earth measure time) after Nona and I entered the world of the Marinoids. The human memory retains only high spots clearly; and those four or five months held nothing which now impresses itself strongly upon me.

You will recall that I had been knocked unconscious by a blow on the head. When I recovered, the ruler of that world had passed on his way and our captors were again dragging us forward.

We came presently to a city. A city, you say! A city under water! Why not? By a city I mean a closely-knit collection of human dwellings where a large number of people lived close together. Is that not a city?

This one was the capital of the Marinoid world. They called it Rax—a brusk, somewhat guttural monosyllable which I write with those three letters.

There we took up our abode with the leader of this Marinoid party which had captured us. There we learned the Marinoid language, and became a part of the Marinoid civilization—with friends and enemies, hopes, fears and despairs.

As I have already told you, our own spoken language was no more than at its beginning. We turned to that of the Mar-

inoids readily; and within a few months it was to all intents and purposes native to us. That you may understand this point, I remind you again that our intellects were matured but unused. We learned like precocious children.

More than that, this contact with other beings with minds like our own brought us rapidly up from the primitive mental state in which I have previously pictured us. We learned that one great trait of civilization—deceit.

You will picture us then—Nona and me—as we were at the end of these months with the Marinoids. We lived in a dwelling near the bottom and outer edge of the city of Rax. The bottom of the city! A strange term! Let me explain.

Here on Earth you live in a world you call three dimensions—length, breadth and thickness. By that, you mean your bodies, and all material objects comprise three dimensions. Perfectly right. But you live *on the surface* of a globe. In general—with exceptions of course—your actions take place in but two dimensions. Your birds move in three dimensions more than you do. And your fishes.

Fishes! There you see my point! In the Marinoid world of water, to move vertically came as naturally as the horizontal movement. Hence, I say the bottom of the city, for Rax had a vertical dimension almost as great as either of its others.

The city was, I should estimate, of roughly circular form some quarter of a mile long and nearly as broad. Like a huge, low cylinder standing on end.

It was a fibrous city of growing sea-vegetation! Huge stalks planted like a thick forest of trees in the sandy ooze of the water-bottom, grew straight upward a thousand feet or more. Broad, leaf-like branches spread from them at the top, sustained in an upright position by air-bladders.

These upright stalks were the vertical girders upon which the fabric of the city was built. For eight hundred feet up they were pruned of their branches. Parasite growing vines had been guided laterally to connect the vertical stalks. And upon these, other rope-like vegetation was woven. The result was a series of tiers some twenty feet apart—one above the other—forty of them from top to bottom of the city.

The tiers were further cut up into segments which served as houses. I shall describe one in detail presently—the one they gave Nona and me at the time our great event took place.

Throughout the city there were both vertical and horizontal streets at intervals—up and down and along which the inhabitants swam or drifted. And occasionally there was cubical open space—a sort of three-dimensional park. One of these, the largest, occupied the exact center of the city, with the ruler's home contiguous to it.

HAVE I made myself clear? The fabric of this entire city—the very walls and rooms of its honeycombed houses—was living, growing vegetation of the sea. It grew rapidly. It was easily trained to grow in desired directions. A third of a man's lifetime, no more, would grow such a city as this.

One species of vegetation? No, there seemed a hundred—each one of them had its specific use and adaptability. It was curious stuff. You have marine vegetation in your great oceans of Earth. You may conceive what this was like. Tough, smooth, somewhat slimy main stalks. But porous—like the stalk of your banana tree. The leaves were intricate and beautifully shaped; and there were millions of tiny air-pods growing everywhere.

When I first saw the city of Rax, I remember marvelling at the ingenuity that could build it. But soon I marveled at the greater ingenuity that could maintain its interior form. The main stalks changed little from year to year. But a constant pruning, altering, uprooting and replanting was necessary throughout every detail. The very walls of a man's house were of varying form. Yet, since each man was responsible for his own, it was easily done.

Above the city, the great branches of the main stalks spread out—green-brown wavering things, a lace-work of great ferns with hundreds of pods twice as big as a man's body—the air-bladders which sustained the entire city.

I have said the water was calm. Not a ripple down here save those made by the animate things themselves. Nature was passive. The half-twilight never altered; the temperature remained always the same; no storms, not a sound of the world disturbed its peace and calm.

Thus stood the city of Rax—tenuous, wavering gently throughout its every fibre. A city which, with one of your Earth-swords, I could have cut loose from its

moorings and slashed to destruction. And you shall hear how one day I did something like that to a similar city. Not destroyed it indeed, merely—but first I must tell you what happened before the coming of Boy—our boy, Nona's and mine—our little son.

CHAPTER X

WE LIVED first in the home of Caan—the leader of the Marinoid party which captured us. He was in charge of gathering the shell-food from the water-bottom in the open spaces beyond the city.

I must sketch all this briefly—there is so much to tell you. We were at first, curiosities to the Marinoids. But we proved our friendliness; and when we learned their language they made us welcome among them.

Our history—what little we had to tell them of the outer world of air, the meteor, the heavens, the great Universe of which we are all so infinitesimal a part—none of this could they comprehend. But—and you of Earth mark me well—these Marinoids did not scoff. They were not unduly credulous either. Their ruler sent for me; and with a thousand ingenious questions sought to test the truth of my words.

I am sure now that it was this knowledge I held of things they had never dreamed of, which raised me to a position of importance among the Marinoids. That, and my physical prowess, which very shortly I was forced to demonstrate.

At all events, I did become a figure of importance in Rax. The ruler—an hereditary monarch whom I shall call King for simplicity—consulted with me frequently after a few months.

When Boy was born they gave us our own home. Caan had been very good to us; we counted him our best friend. He swam about the city with Nona and me helping us to select from among the vacant dwellings.

Can you picture us upon such a journey? The horizontal streets were like square tunnels twenty feet broad and equally as high—top and bottom a tangle of woven, green-brown vegetation, carefully pruned; sides formed by the rows of houses. There were windows and doors to the houses, with removable screens of vegetation.

The streets were artificially lighted. In the open water outside the city there was enough light inherent to the water itself to give a sort of twilight. But within the city, shut in by all this vegetation, it would have been too dark for comfort. At intervals along the streets a transverse strand of vine was stretched. From it hung a huge pod—half as big as a man perhaps. The pod was a vegetable air bladder, of a variety whose walls were exceedingly thin and translucent.

From these pods, which hung like lamps, a greenish-silver glow emanated. It spread downward in a ray of illumination through the water of the street; it cast queer, blurred, monstrous shadows of the Marinoids swimming past it.

You will be interested to know what the light was. Small, self-luminous organisms were gathered from the open water and placed—hundreds of them—in the translucent pods. Similar organisms to these form the familiar "phosphorescence" of the tropical waters of your Earth. But these were much larger—more the size of your glow-worms.

We swam slowly along. A few Marinoids were in the streets, passing us as they went to their occupations. From a window, or the bottom of a doorway, a naked child would peer at us with big curious eyes. In a horizontal street of more pretentious houses, where the tunnel deepened to two stories, a woman sat in the corner of a little balcony, nursing her infant. Beside her, two older children played a game with shining opalescent shells.

We turned upward into a vertical street. You would call it a huge elevator shaft. Its lights were fastened to the sides of buildings. Here the houses were one on top of the other—a single low story only, and very long horizontally. Nona did not like them; one was vacant here and Caan suggested it but she refused it decisively. I had no opinion to offer; they all looked all right to me.

We swam upward and soon reached the central cube of open space. Here was the ruler's palace. Open water surrounded it on all four sides, and on top. The main stalks of the building grew above it with graceful hovering fronds of green—fronds whose smallest pods were luminous like a hundred tiny Chinese lanterns — under which, on the roof of the building, was a garden. There were small plants growing there, gleaming white shells laid out in designs, a bed of black ooze with brillant

red things like flowers growing in it. A row of small illuminated pods formed a parapet to the roof-top.

THE main building was not as large as the term "palace" sounds—it was not over fifty feet in its greatest dimension. It had both vertical and horizontal balconies, and a broad horizontal doorway near the top—a doorway built of shimmering iridescent shells plastered together with mud and a gluey substance which was made from one of the Marinoid plants. And on a tiny platform by the doorway lay the shell sleigh with its marine animal and its driver in waiting—the sleigh in which I had first seen the King.

It was to us a magnificent dwelling, this palace. Nona and I floated before it, gazing with awe. But my heart sank, for I knew that now Nona had seen it, we should have much more difficulty in selecting our own humble little home.

It was indeed, almost the time of sleep before Nona made her choice. She selected a two-story house, at the intersection of a horizontal with a vertical street. It had one room upstairs, and two downstairs—small rooms, you would call them, no more than fifteen feet cube.

But the house had a little horizontal balcony upstairs. On it Nona could lie and watch the people passing. And Caan told us that these streets were on the route the King habitually used when leaving the city with his equipage. I think it was the balcony that decided Nona. For myself, I was pleased because we were only a very short distance from the home of Caan.

Our room of sleep had bunks built into the wall—bunks which were soft with a springy growing mass of mattress—a grey-white growth which *you* would call a sponge. There was a large ornamental shell standing like a table in the center of the room; and a window giving onto the balcony and the street. The window had a leafy, swinging blind for privacy.

For ventilation we left the window open. Ventilation, you say! Ventilation in a city of water! Most assuredly. Your most humble fish will die without fresh water. We were using the air held in solution by the water; and fresh water with new air was constantly necessary.

Once, after each time of sleep, the whole city was "ventilated." Swimming animals—sleek shining things of brown, with slimy bodies like wet seals—pulled a sort of shield rapidly back and forth through the streets. The shield was large; it almost filled the street. Its movement stirred the water; pulled the water by suction into the city from outside.

I was describing our house, but there is so much to tell you I must be briefer. Downstairs we had circular shells to recline in and a place to store and prepare our food. And every room was lighted with a pod which had a green-moss shade that could envelope it when darkness was desired.

Nona was delighted with the house and immediately began planning a hundred ways to improve it. The place was in good repair, but there was much pruning and retaining of the vegetation to be done. And then, when we had slept in the house but once, and were both busily engaged with our own affairs, Og came to see us. He came to see Nona, I should say—for certainly *I* never liked him. His coming was the immediate cause of my being forced to display my physical strength—to which occasion I have already alluded.

I fought Og twice—the first time in a pretentious hand-to-hand combat before the King's palace, which attracted the attention of the entire city. It was a queer combat—unfortunate for me. I shall tell you about it at once.

CHAPTER XI

OG STOOD in our little doorway, talking to Nona. He was a young man about my own age. I have since learned he was not full-blooded Marinoid—but that can come later. He was somewhat taller than Nona, but shorter than myself. His legs, with their connecting membrane, were bare to slightly above the knee. From there to his shoulders, he was dressed in the characteristic Marinoid fashion—a single-piece garment of green woven grass. On his bulging chest he wore an ornament—a flat, circular affair of many tiny shells linked together. His four, tentacle-like arms waved before him. The hair on his head was thick and matted, but short. With one of his pincers he would occasionally brush it—a gesture evidently intended to impress Nona with his grace.

Og's face—with features not much different from my own except that his mouth was larger and his eyes slightly protrud-

ing—was nevertheless most unpleasant. His chin was weak, his expression egotistical; and more than that, I never liked the way he looked at Nona.

A queer sort of being—this Marinoid—for me to be jealous of! If you are thinking that, you are wholly wrong. We were living in a Marinoid world, and in all that world only Nona and I were queer-looking! *It was we who were abnormal, not they!*

Nona, with her flowing hair and her short grey-green Marinoid jacket, was to me the most beautiful creature in the world. But, as Caan pointed out, our eyes—Nona's and mine—were set too deep in our head to be of real use in seeing sidewise. Our mouths were too small to admit the water comfortably, and our chests too small and immobile to handle it properly. Two arms, which could bend in only one direction, were surely not so advantageous as the four Marinoid arms; and our legs, without the connecting membrane, would keep us always very indifferent swimmers. This was before I demonstrated my muscular strength; Caan changed his opinion a little after that.

I HAVE wandered from Og. Nona unwittingly attracted him, in spite of her physical handicaps. I know why now. He was a half-breed; the blood in his veins which was not Marinoid barred him from finding a mate among the Marinoid women. And when Nona came he wanted her.

I did not know this at the time, but I sensed it. And Nona too was afraid of Og, though she had not shown it outwardly.

I was in the other room this time when Og came to our new home. He stood there talking to Nona; and suddenly I heard her scream. I launched myself in a dive through the inner doorway. They were up near the ceiling and Nona was struggling with him. He was laughing; he dropped her, and came swimming down to face me, still grinning insolently.

"She is tempting," he said. "She has learned the ways of the Marinoid women very quickly."

I swam at him, but he avoided me; and before I could seize him, Caan appeared in the doorway and stopped me.

Nona was crying. Caan would let me do nothing. Physical altercations were a dire offense in Rax. I could report Og for trial and punishment, but I could not personally attack him.

In his insolent confidence, however, Og did the one thing I would have wanted. He swam at me and struck me lightly in the face with the side of his left-front arm. It was not so different from one of your old customs here on Earth. He had challenged me to public combat. A duel? Call it that, if you wish.

Caan made all the arrangements. We were to fight after the next time of sleep, in the open cube before the King's palace, with the King, Queen and young Prince on the palace roof to judge us.

Nona was frightened; she cried all that day. At Caan's suggestion we slept that next time in his home, where his wife (I use the term wife, although it is inapplicable) could care for Nona.

The combat was to be without artificial weapons—and in spite of Nona's feminine fear—I could not take it seriously. I was only twenty, you will remember, and youth is absurdly confident in itself.

Caan, however, was very grave. I did not know it at the time, but the combat was intended to be to the death. Og understood it so—and the whole city was stirred by it. As for the King, it would be an interesting sport for him as spectator; a thousand times of sleep had passed since such a sight had been offered.

Caan was very kindly to me that evening, solicitous and perturbed. Once he started to question me about my methods of fighting. Youth is so foolish! I laughed at him.

"I shall twist him in my hands before he can touch me," I said boastfully. "We will not talk of it now, my friend, Caan. It frightens my Nona."

At once he subsided. He had indeed something important to tell me. But my words chanced to make him think I knew it. The Marinoid is by nature reticent; he will force nothing upon you—offer no advice that you do not solicit. I was as it happened entirely ignorant of this thing he feared; had I not been I should have looked forward to the combat with alarm and probably terror.

Nona would not go to the scene. But Caan went to represent me, and lay on the palace roof beside the King.

THE cube of water was a brilliant, gay arena. Illuminated air bladders were hanging from the palace balconies and from the foliage above its roof-garden. Everywhere about the cube, top, bottom and

all four sides, these lanterns were banked in rows, so that the open water in which we were to fight was a bright, greenish glare of light.

On the roof-top there were perhaps ten Marinoids in addition to the Royal Family. They were reclining behind the row of lamps; and these lamps were shaded like the footlights of one of your theatres.

Across the cube, facing the palace, were a few balconied houses of the more important inhabitants of the city. Their lights, too, were shaded to throw the beams outward toward the open water. These balconies were all crowded with Marinoid men and women.

At every street entrance to the cube other Marinoids were crowded; a hundred or more of them lay prone on the lower surface, their gaze directed upward. And above, a swarm of others clung to the roof of the arena, or hovered in the foliage, staring downward.

The King's sleigh was gone from its platform; a group of his guards stood there instead. Occasionally one would swim out to warn back a trespasser.

When Caan and I arrived, the figure of Og, nude save for a loin-cloth, was hovering alone near the center of the open water; his legs were moving very slowly, his four arms waving as he sustained himself. Every eye in the crowd was upon him. His face bore a confident, leering smile—the challenger waiting for his opponent.

Shouts arose as Caan and I pushed forward through the crowd. Caan took my outer garment, and with a grave word of encouragement, left me. My gaze followed him as he swam upward to join the King's party.

A hush fell upon the crowd. The water now was soundless; then suddenly Og called to me—a sneering shout of defiance. I was not afraid; I was sorry Nona was not here to see me fight.

Slowly I mounted upward through the empty water to meet Og. And then the Queen did a curious thing. Her soft but commanding voice rang out over the stillness; she ordered me up to the roof-top.

I obeyed, hovering respectfully before her.

"I hope that you will win," she said softly, yet loud enough so that all might hear. "You are badly equipped to fight—but you are in the right."

There was some applause, for Og was not popular in Rax; but she silenced it.

"Go—do your best." She dismissed me with a gesture.

As I was turning away, my heart swelling with pride at the incident, the young Prince—he was about my own age, and had already shown some liking for me—called out softly but vehemently:

"Nemo, do not let him touch your head and feet at the same time."

"No," I said, "and I thank you both."

I swam slowly back to meet Og. I had no idea what the Prince meant; but I followed his warning as well as I could, until in the heat of the fight, as you shall see, I forgot it.

Og was waiting, facing me alertly. His arms and legs had ceased waving; his body was tense; he was sinking slowly downward. I followed him down with no more than ten feet separating us. I wondered when he would come at me. I would wait; then grip him around his chest and crush him with my superior strength.

The silence in that bright, glaring water was oppressive; we were sinking nearly to the bottom of the arena. Without warning, I doubled my body and dove forward—rushing at Og with all the strength I could put into my swimming strokes.

CHAPTER XII

I WAS a good swimmer; there are none like me among the humans of your Earth. But I soon found I was not the equal of Og. He eluded my first rush. With his arms close against his sides, his body slipped between my outstretched hands. He mounted upward—a pink streak through the glaring water.

I was after him. Up in the foliage, almost directly over the King, he hovered, waiting for me. The contemptuous smile on his face maddened me. As I came up, he turned sidewise into another dive, but I gripped his ankle as it went past me.

The crowd was shouting as we floundered, churning the water. I was trying to turn and clutch Og around the body. But he twisted away. I knew, if I could once get him in my grip, I could crush him. But he seemed to know it also.

I still held his ankle, and he did not try to kick himself loose. He seemed to be manoeuvering for something. He was swimming forcibly downward now, using

his arms but leaving his legs limp. It drew our bodies through the water in a single straight line, like one boat towing another. Then Og turned into a sharp circle. I still clung to him, and his body, bent like a bow, went over mine. The movement brought his head near my feet. One of his arms swept down, made a clutch for my ankle, but missed.

I heard the shout of mingled horror and relief from the crowd. I was now above Og. Our turning movement confused me. The bottom of the arena was over my head in another instant; then the side and top swung past.

Og made another clutch at my ankles; and warned at last of some danger which I did not understand, I dropped him abruptly and swam away. He did not chase me, but turned over a few times more and then hovered in the center of the cube.

Into the upper foliage I swam. I was breathing heavily. My chest seemed constricted. I was not physically able to undergo such exertion without distress. I realized it. The excess oxygen my blood was demanding could not be obtained by my lungs from water. I would have to get my grip around Og at once.

Some of the spectators were now shouting at me derisively. They thought that after this first encounter I was now afraid of my adversary.

Afraid? I was beginning to be in truth. I ground my teeth, and turning, head downward, again dove for Og. He waited, quietly; he was tense again, his body slowly sinking.

Ten feet from him, I brought myself up short. We faced each other, both sinking gradually. Once he slid forward, and made a pass at me with an arm. But I dove away, returning at once.

We were nearly at the bottom of the arena when Og suddenly threw all four arms above his head. His body was bent forward, crescent-shaped. It seemed to be my opportunity. I rushed at him. He retreated; and as I came into an upright position for another lunge, his body bent over me like a bow. One of his feet touched one of mine; and simultaneously his fingers struck my head.

For a brief instant I was conscious that his touch seemed to burn. A tingling shock ran through me. Then, inert and unconscious, my stiffened body sank slowly to the bottom of the arena.

CHAPTER XIII

I RECOVERED my senses, and heard dim voices around me. I did not open my eyes, but lay quiet, half in a dream. I remembered the combat; I thought, perchance, I was dead. I recall now how vague musings floated through my brain. I had been alone on a meteor—then I found people—civilization. Unhappiness and strife had come with them. To be really happy and at ease, one ought to be alone in his world. And yet, there were friends to be found as well as enemies. There was Caan, and the Marinoid Prince. He was my friend; he had warned me against Og. And there was love to be found, too. Nona!

The thought of Nona stirred me to fuller consciousness. The voices around me seemed to grow louder. I opened my eyes.

I was in a bunk at Caan's house. Caan was there beside me—and an old, bent Marinoid whose work I knew was the care and treatment of the human body in distress.

Nona was sitting on the bunk close to me; her wonderful golden hair floated above us. Her face was white and set. As she saw me stir and open my eyes, she burst into sobs. My arms went up to pull her down to me. My Nona! And Caan. My friend Caan was gravely joyful to see me come back to life.

The old Marinoid was talking quietly to Caan about me, and then he left. Nona lay in my arms; presently the Prince sent a messenger to inquire if I were recovered. My cup of happiness was full.

It was far into the next time of sleep after the combat before I had regained my senses; and throughout all that time Nona and Caan had been beside me. I did not seem greatly injured. I was soon strong enough to talk with them, to find out what Og had done to me.

It was simple, and when I understood it I shuddered at the danger into which I had so rashly and ignorantly rushed. Og had shocked me into insensibility with a bolt of animal electricity. The bodies of all adult male Marinoids contain special electrical organs for the generation of it. The bolt can be released at will; its control is entirely voluntary.

Og had manoeuvered, I recalled at once,

to get me into the right position to receive the maximum shock. His body was bent over me like a bow; he touched my extremities, with his extremities simultaneously; and the current, passing through my body, had all but stopped the beating of my heart.

Caan had thought I was on my guard regarding this. My words had made him think so; and I had refused to discuss the fight. And the Prince had meant to warn me of it.

I had indeed, heard of this natural weapon possessed by the Marinoids. But in my youthful confidence I had forgotten it, for the use of it against a human except in public mortal combat was a dire offense against the Marinoid laws.

YOU are amazed and perhaps incredulous at this physiological fact? You need not be—a very similar condition occurs on your own Earth. Indeed, only the ignorant can dare be rashly incredulous. In your own waters, as you would know if you ever bothered to apprise yourself of the fact, there exists the electric eel. Your learned men call it *gymnotus electricus*. It uses against its enemies very similar tactics to those Og used against me. And with very similar results, for it can kill or stun a fish much larger than itself. Many an ignorant native fisherman in the smaller streams which empty into your Orinoco River, has learned this fact to his cost.

And, to multiply instances, you have the *torpedo* and the whole family of *rays*. It was from them your scientist Galvani made his study of the electrical properties of muscles and nerves, applying his discoveries to the higher animals and to man.

I was soon recovered—and a wiser man than before. And I swore to myself that never again would I ignore the proffered advice of a friend.

My first desire was to fight Og again at once. With the knowledge of what I must avoid, I knew I could defeat him. I went to the place he lived, but he was not there.

The news that I wanted another combat—which was my right—spread through the city. Og had doubtless hoped I would die; when I recovered, and searched for him, he could not be found. After the next time of sleep, I learned he had left Rax. Shell-fish gatherers, working under Caan, reported seeing him swimming alone toward the Water of Wild Things.

He did not return. The region known as the Water of Wild Things was where he had been born, some said, and his only relations were among the half-savage beings living there.

I was content. With Og gone — my second fight with him, indeed was postponed for a considerable time—there was nothing in Rax to disturb my own and my Nona's happiness. We had our home, our love and our son.

CHAPTER XIV

I GO back again in my memories to that year in the underwater Marinoid city of Rax—the year of quiet and peace for Nona and me which followed the birth of our son. Boy, we called him; everyone called him that, for he was the only child of his kind in our world.

It was a wonderful, happy time for us both. In all the Universe there was never another like our Boy. So thought Nona and I. Pink and white, with his laughing blue eyes, and soft blond hair on his little head, he would lie cradled in the big white shell that stood in the center of our living room. The tiny bits of vegetation which often floated in the water past his face were his toys to snatch at and demolish; and Nona, who fed him, crooned to him, and when he was no more than a month or two old guided his baby flounderings into swimming strokes, was the center of everything around which his infant world revolved.

For myself, almost an outsider with these two, it was enough to watch them playing together, to see the light of motherhood in my Nona's eyes, and the glory of it on her face.

The time—unmarked by daylight or darkness down here in the water—glided by; and for us the passing days meant only that Boy was growing larger, his limbs were lengthening, his neck would now support his head, he could swim and soon he would begin to talk.

Thus can happiness exclude one from the world around. Yet it must not be inferred that we lived at home in complete seclusion. There were happy times with our friend Caan and his family—in his home when Boy would lie there asleep and we others would play at a game of floating shells.

And there were other times when I went hunting with the Prince. He seemed to like me—and his friendship I must confess, was to me a great joy and pride. Like many another Prince of your own Earth, Prince Atar was a sportsman. Occasionally, heading a little party of his friends, he and I would hunt together, swimming toward the Water of Wild Things, where, over the cliffs which bordered the Marinoid domain, strange fearsome creatures would sometimes trespass.

My means of livelihood? Oh yes, I was a worker like the rest. There was no place in Rax for a drone; and Nona and I were by no means guests of the city—no longer than the first month or two. When they gave us our home I was assigned to work with Caan. After each Time of Sleep, we swam out with our baskets into the open spaces beyond the forest which surrounded the city. We would gather up the shell-food that lay on the sea-bottom. It was continually sifting down from above, and what we collected was later gathered and driven in to Rax, to the government storehouses.

Caan's wife worked with us—for women, even though married, were obliged to work for the public good a portion of the time. After Boy was born Nona, too, often joined us—though this was not obligatory, for the care of infant children discharged a woman of the debt of working otherwise.

There is so much that my memory holds to tell you of this strange Marinoid civilization! But you, with your life to live at high speed, would weary of me if I were not careful. You want everything at a glance—and you shall have it.

Let me say then that during this peaceful year there were occurring in Rax a series of mysterious incidents of an exceedingly sinister character—incidents which shortly were to lead us into the most stirring and critical period of Marinoid history. But we did not know this at the time. Life—wherever in the Universe it may be found—runs on a similar plan. It's like a puzzle—a jigsaw puzzle whose picture remains undefined until you fit the last segment into place.

So it was with these ominous events that now occurred one by one in Rax. (And the absent Og, I may say, was at the bottom of them.) Each in itself seemed relatively unimportant. Yet all were part of a plan of destruction that was menacing us like an unseen sword hung suspended. We awoke to a realization of the danger, finally. You shall hear how it was I, who—when the thing at last struck home as a personal tragedy to me—played a leading part in the stirring scenes that followed.

May I ask you first to bear with me a moment more, while I give you a very brief summary of conditions in our Marinoid world? I know you will chafe. A thousand supposedly pressing duties of your own super-civilized life are forcing themselves upon you even at this moment of relaxation. Set them aside, I beg you. They are not nearly so important as you think. If you were to die tonight, leaving all of them undone—your world would go on as placidly as before.

A moment then—and you shall have action and movement to your heart's content.

CHAPTER XV

THE region of the Marinoids was a stretch of water bounded by great rocky cliffs on all sides. It was subterranean water—by which I mean that by ascending in it one came at last to a rocky ceiling. We were, at Rax, near the center of this subterranean sea. What was its extent, I cannot say. All measurements, all standards of comparison, were lost to me. In depth—at Rax—it might have been two thousand feet or more from the sea-floor to the ceiling above, which is to say some two or three times the depth of the city itself.

How many entrances there were from the outside world, I do not know. Through one of them Nona and I had come when Caan and his party first encountered us. To the Marinoids, who were not explorers, the idea of a surface to water was inexplicable. They could not conceive of such a thing; they could not understand it when I tried to explain it to them.

There were several Marinoid cities besides Rax, but none nearly so large. And there was—shall I say a rural?—population. In the great forests, Marinoid dwellings were occasionally to be found—isolated huts of sea-weed, clinging like bird-nests to the wavering branches of the trees. And in the open water other scattered families of a more adventurous turn, lived in huge shells from which they had excavated the living tissue—or lived in holes hollowed out of the banks of black ooze.

The boundaries of the Marinoid domain presented themselves as almost perpendicular cliffs—dark, jagged rock, with slabs and banks of black clay, mounds of coral, red, black and white, or a tangle of slimy vegetation. Openings which were caves—a cliff-face honeycombed with them. And the ceiling was of similar character.

One of the boundaries—the one nearly opposite to where Nona and I had entered this world—was somewhat different. Here the cliff-face rose to over three thousand feet. But here also, the ceiling was even higher, so that between them there was left an opening a hundred feet or more in height, and a mile, at least, in horizontal width. It was a fearsome opening. Its floor seemed to extend backward and downward. The water in there was black; a thick slimy ooze was under it. And there seemed to be in it the suggestion of a noisome stench that lay beyond.

This was the entrance to another region, of unknown extent—the Water of Wild Things as the Marinoids called it. What might lie in there, none could say. A few had penetrated into it a short distance, and returned with lurid tales which none believed. And others had gone and never come back.

But that there were half-savage humans living there, everyone believed. Og was bred of them, some said; and now that he had voluntarily gone there to live, as rumor had it, so much seemed a certainty.

Strange animals occasionally came from the Water of Wild Things. A sea-monster had come once. But that was in the dim past, remembered only by legend. The monster had all but overcome the cloud of Marinoids who had desperately set upon it.

Such were the conditions under which we, at Rax, were living.

And now I am ready to tell you of that series of incidents which awakened us to our danger. They did not at first concern me personally, and so I paid them little heed. That is a commentary upon your own life, is it not? Soon the thing struck home to me with its tragedy. Ah, then how different it seemed! We can bear the grief of our friend so much more philosophically than our own!

THE first of these incidents in Rax came when Boy was about two months old. A young virgin, the daughter of one of Caan's worker, disappeared. She was a girl somewhat younger than Nona. She was beautiful, in Marinoid fashion. To you, all these Marinoids must seem grotesque—unhuman perhaps. But beauty is not universally standardized—only locally. We admire our own kind. Your natives of Zanzibar think their own black-skinned, thick-lipped belles the most beautiful on Earth. And as I have said once before, in the Marinoid world the Marinoid women were the standard of beauty. Nona, so different, was the exception, the abnormality.

This girl who disappeared had been with one of Caan's scattered parties working on the sea-bottom, gathering shell-food. She had wandered away from the others, and when the time came to return to Rax, she was missing. We thought she might have become ill and gone home.

But she was not at home—nor could she be found anywhere in the city. Even this did not arouse much interest, except to her own immediate family. It was thought that some young Marinoid man had taken her for mate. According to custom the couple might readily have disappeared for a time—gone out together to live in the forest to escape work until their first period of love was past.

But there seemed no young man unaccounted for—and the girl did not return. Even so, the incident would have been forgotten, but soon another young girl disappeared.

There were perhaps thirty who vanished during that year. They were not all from the workers outside the city. We had long since ceased to take women with us; and those who lived in the forests and the mudbanks came crowding into Rax—and to the other cities nearby.

We knew very soon, of course, that our Marinoid women were being stolen. And there was one crowning incident that at last made us understand.

It was at what you would call midnight, when the city was asleep. Caan and I, on a belated errand, were swimming down one of the vertical streets. The place was deserted; the street was empty; the lights at intervals on the side walls of the houses illumined the water with a green, diffused glow—like lights in a thick fog at night on your Earth. The windows along the street for the most part stood open. Everywhere was heavy silence, with only the swish of the water as Caan and I swam through it.

A green figure in the horizontal street below us attracted our attention. It seemed to be a man swathed in a green cloak of seaweed. He saw us coming, and darting up to the street light which hung nearby, he flung something over it.

The light was obliterated; shadows fell over everything.

Caan and I were startled; we hung poised, just above the cross-street so that we could see along it in both directions. There were lights at distant corners. We heard a low but penetrating cry from near at hand. A signal! Other figures in the distance darted up through the water and put out the lights. The entire street was in darkness.

Caan and I whirled downward, shouting. Through the window of a house, we saw the stiffened body of a woman come floating. There was light enough for us to see her white face and arms—a woman unconscious, shocked into insensibility as we later learned, by a bolt of animal electricity from her abductor.

Her body floated from the window as though pushed from behind. In the darkness, green swathed forms seized it—forms which were barely discernible as blurs in the dark water—seized it and began rapidly towing it away.

Caan and I were after them. Our cries were arousing the city. Voices—confused questions—came from within the houses. Figures appeared; the street behind us was in a turmoil.

The woman's body with its almost invisible assailants was moving forward rapidly. Lines of white as the highly aerated water was stirred, radiated out V-shaped from its rapid progress.

But Caan and I, unburdened, could swim the faster. We overtook the invaders. There was a struggle in the darkness. A bolt of electricity went through me, but I recovered from it. Caan was shouting in hot anger as he struck at the green shapes that were attacking him.

The water all about us was lashed into white. It caught and reflected the light from a suddenly illumined window near at hand. I found myself gripping Og!

"You!"

But my voice seemed to inspire him to frenzied effort. He jerked away from me—was gone into the shadows.

Caan was now shouting triumphantly. He had dispersed his adversaries. The woman's white body—neglected—had sunk to the floor of the street. We swam down to her, chafed her arms and neck until at last she recovered consciousness.

The street was relighted. The houses were emptying themselves of their frightened inmates. A crowd gathered around us with confused startled questioning.

But Og and all his cohorts had escaped.

An hour later, when I returned home, Boy was lying in the hollow white shell which was his cradle, crying lustily. And Nona—my Nona—was gone!

CHAPTER XVI

THE hours that followed were a confused horror and despair to me. Yet there seemed no one but myself and Caan who considered this disaster more vital than those which had preceded it. At last we knew that the young women of Rax were being stolen—from under our very eyes—from the heart of the city, in the silence of the Time of Sleep. We knew now also, that they were being taken into the dread Water of Wild Things. Og's presence proved that. Og had gone to live with the fabled humans, half-savage, that legend said lived with the monsters of that strange dark region. And now Og had come back—and had been caught in the very act of an abduction. It was all clear now. And all we had to do was to guard our women—to watch carefully the entrance to the Water of Wild Things, that nothing, human or savage, could come out of it to trespass on the Marinoid domain.

Thus ran the sentiment of the city; and the King, making a speech from the parapet of his palace roof-top, assured us in flowing phrases that the danger now was past. No marauders could come from the Water of Wild Things now that we were on the alert to stop them. He, our Monarch, assured us of that. Our women in future, were secure.

Had Nona been safe at my side, no doubt I should have applauded these sentiments as did most of the other onlookers. But Nona was not at my side. She was gone—into that horrible unknown region from whence none returned. The King said Marinoid women now were safe! What was that to me, with my Nona gone?

There was talk of an expedition into the Water of Wild Things. But none would

volunteer, save those comparatively few who already had lost wives or daughters. Caan stood by me. He would go. And I —there would have been no sleep or food for me again had I tried to stay in Rax and yield up Nona to her fate.

There were no artificial weapons available in Rax save of one type—that slim hunting spear made of fish-bone—the spear with which the King's attendant had struck me down when first I was being brought to Rax. These spears were all the Prince and I had had for our hunting expeditions.

Other weapons? The Marinoids had had them in times gone by. But once—a lifetime before—civil war had broken out between two of the Marinoid cities; and when it was over all weapons save the simple spear, were abolished. There seemed no need of weapons. There was practically no wild life in Marinoid waters. The monster that had once come to devour them was a fable out of the distant past. And so they lived on in a false security making themselves defenseless so that they would not be tempted to fight; and forgetting that their very defenselessness must prove an irresistible temptation for some enemy to attack them!

We organized our meager, pitiful little rescue party. Led by Caan and me—with Caan's wife to care for Boy while we were gone—there were no more than fifty of us in total. Then, quite without warning, Prince Atar signified his intention of joining us—commanding us in person.

Can you guess the joy it brought to my heart? Our Prince, disregarding even the commands of his father, was coming with us!

Atar—for so I called him now in the intimacy which had come between us—was younger than myself. A slim, clear-featured youth, with a boyish smile, but eyes which had in them the look of one born to command. And Caan—a man past the zenith of his life, whose arms were no longer limber with youth but with a body strong and sturdy nevertheless. With these two to help me I felt that I could conquer whatever strange creatures we might encounter—and get my Nona back.

Our party was no more than together, when Atar announced we were making a mistake. There were fifty of us, practically unarmed. We were too large a party to go anywhere in secret; we would, by our very numbers, be but provoking an attack.

ATAR'S plan, in brief, was that he, Caan and myself, should slip quietly into the Water of Wild Things and see what conditions were there. Then, perhaps without ever having been seen or forcing an encounter, we could return and plan an expedition in greater force—a force sufficiently great to insure success.

To me, whose one and only desire was to follow Nona and get her back, the Prince's words seemed rational indeed. What did I care for the safety of those other Marinoid girls who had been stolen?

The Prince, nevertheless, was right from every angle, and so it was decided that we three should go alone.

I shall never forget the scene as the Prince parted from his mother on the rooftop of the Palace. We were going to what everyone considered almost certain death. We would go, and they would never see or hear from us again.

But with these Marinoids there were no heroics. No shouting and applause as the heroes went forth to battle. That is left for you really civilized humans who wage war after a more vainglorious fashion.

These Marinoids, crowding every corner of the cube of open water before the King's palace, hovered in silence as we prepared to leave. And the silence deepened as the Queen stood before her son, and he knelt at her feet.

"Goodbye, Atar," she said; and her glance included Caan and me. "We will wait and hope—for you to come back."

Her arm brushed his sleek head as he rose and turned away. We departed; and her brave, inscrutable smile followed us, as between those silent, solemn ranks of spectators we slowly swam along the streets and out of the city.

And presently, with tumultuously beating hearts, we three with only our slender spears, were approaching that dread black opening which marked the entrance to the Water of Wild Things.

CHAPTER XVII

WE ENTERED the opening, swimming in a group with Atar leading. It was already new territory for us. Our hunting expeditions had never taken us even as far as this;

we were always content to remain in Marinoid waters. As we advanced, the rocky ceiling overhead was closing down on us, until soon there was no more than twice the length of our bodies between it and the floor.

On both sides the dark water stretched out as far as we could see into blackness also. We were descending now at an angle of perhaps forty-five degrees.

We had gone what you would call a mile possibly, when we came suddenly to a tangle of coral—a barrier that reached from floor to ceiling. I call it coral. It might have been a petrified vegetation. An all but impenetrable thicket—white like the frosted underbrush of your Northern winter forests—it seemed to bar our further progress.

We stopped; consulted, and swam to the left and right. But the tangle extended in both directions to the edges of the mile-wide passageway.

"It is this," said Atar, "which keeps our own region free of monsters. They cannot easily pass a barrier like this." He was smiling at Caan and me. "To this, perhaps we owe our safety."

Caan was poking at the thicket, and we found after a moment that we could with difficulty force our way through it.

The realization that Atar's words brought us was at once reassuring and alarming. If no creatures of the wild could pass this barrier, what then might lie on its other side?

Caan, older and more poised than either Atar or me, was wasting no time on such thoughts.

"Come," he said. "Here we can get through."

The white underbrush must have extended for several hundred feet back and downward. We forced our bodies through it, seeking small orifices, bending aside the twigs, or breaking them off for they were very brittle.

We were an hour or more getting through. A few small bottle-shaped fish with protruding, ball-like eyes on the sides of the head, lurked here and there. They watched us curiously—unafraid, almost resentful it seemed, with their sidelong glances and their hasteless movements to avoid us. But we paid them little heed, for such as they often wandered into Marinoid waters and were easily killed with our spears.

The tangle of white underbrush gave way at last into open water. Again we saw the ceiling and floor close together—the same narrow slit sloping sharply downward.

With the white underbrush gone, the water seemed darker—so dark that we could hardly see each other a few lengths away. It was warmer too—unpleasantly warm; and to our nostrils came the taint of that stench now unmistakable.

We had been swimming downward for what seemed an interminable time when abruptly the floor beneath us dropped away into a perpendicular cliff. Simultaneously the ceiling had heightened—disappeared into the watery shadows. We found ourselves poised with a vast void of ink before us. It might have been illimitable for all we could see of its boundaries. And empty! There was nothing but blackness—but it was that pregnant blackness that seems, not empty but merely to conceal.

"We must go down," said Atar. I could hear that he was trying to keep his voice steady. "They would live—down on the sea-bottom."

We descended along the side of the perpendicular cliff. A thousand feet? Three thousand? I cannot say. The water grew steadily warmer until its heat began seriously to oppress us. The thought came to me suddenly that we were well into the bowels of my meteor; its internal fires, now very close perhaps, were heating the water. My meteor! How remote the outside world—the outer surface—the Heavens—Saturn—the stars and the vast, unfathomable distances of the Stellar Universe—seemed to me now! I had been born out there somewhere. It was the first time in ages that such a memory had crossed my mind.

"Look!" cried Caan softly.

We huddled together against that black cliff-face. Below us in the void, a glowing point of light was moving. It seemed miles away; but it was no more than twenty or thirty feet, for as it approached we saw it was a long, sinuous thing with an illuminated head—a head that glowed phosphorescent—luridly green.

We held our breaths. The thing went past us—quietly, without seeming to notice us. It was a ribbon-like thing thirty feet long, two feet high, and no more than a few inches thick. A pallid white ribbon of puffy slime, frayed and tattered at its edges, it undulated gruesomely from end to end.

In a moment it was gone, into that void of ink from whence it had come.

Again we descended. Other creatures passed us—headless things of black with illuminated parasites clinging to them; great fishes, star-shaped, with a brilliant green head in the center and each point of the star as long as our bodies; fishes, or were they animals? that were all head, it seemed.

We took heart, for none seemed to notice us. But there was a balloon of white jelly. It floated past us quite close. It was larger than any one of us. It seemed harmless and Atar swam beside it. Then suddenly the thing expanded, lost all its form and like a cloud of white mist, enveloped him. He screamed and we rushed to his rescue.

In an instant we were all three plunged into a confused, frantic horror for which I can find no words. Like thick white glue that was sticky, yet slimy, this almost imponderable stuff fought with us! Fought, I say—for it was using an intelligence against us! We floundered, flailing the water with frantic arms and legs. A noisome stench from the gluey stuff sickened us; the feel of it made our flesh crawl and the gorge rise in our throats. It was uncannily flimsy stuff. We could tear it into shreds, fling it away; but always it came back, to weld itself together. There was an intelligence in it! Not a centralized power of thought, like a brain, but an instinct for battle that must have been inherent in every smallest fibre of it.

We escaped at last. How, I do not know. Perhaps the thing wearied of us. And as we struggled away exhausted, with its horrible gluey particles which we had breathed in choking our lungs—we saw it floating off, ragged but still balloon-like, its original shape almost unimpaired.

WE REACHED at last the bottom of the void. It was not level, but tumbled as though some cataclysm of nature had tossed it about. Banks of black ooze, a hundred feet high, were honeycombed with holes; valleys were beside them—valleys bristling with stalactites of black and white coral which stood up like pointed spears to impale the unwary trespasser. And there were miniature volcanic-looking peaks—cone-shaped. From one of them a stream of water almost hot, was issuing.

Frequently now, we saw lights; and all of them were the naturally lighted heads and bodies of swimming creatures. They moved about lazily, confidently, ignoring us; and we knew that when they were hungry they would feed, either upon others smaller of their kind—or upon us.

Over this tumbled, broken sea-bottom—where occasionally a giant crab or something of the kind would scuttle from a shadow into one of the deeper shadowed holes—we swam at an altitude of about fifty feet. We carried no light; and our bodies were shrouded in green-black cloaks. We still held our spears—poor, useless, futile things! Yet, as Atar said, they might not be useless against humans. And it was the humans, with their greater intelligence, that we now feared most. Conditions of life here in the Water of Wild Things, now became plain to us. These wild creatures were for the most part inoffensive up to the point of satisfying their own need for food. They fed upon each other and thus reduced their number. The humans, in open battle with them, were doubtless helpless. But the humans had the intelligence to hide—to esape. And the creaures of the wild did not bother unduly to pursue them.

Does this seem illogical to you? I assure you, it is not. The conditions we found, here in the Water of Wild Things, in the bowels of that meteor flying amid the Rings of Saturn, were almost identical with those which prevailed in the early periods of your own Earth's history. There is not, and never has been, a wild creature as predatory, as ferocious as Man himself. Your lion and tiger are cowards unless spurred by fright or hunger. The wild animals of your Earth would have been glad to live at peace with Mankind. It has been Man himself who consistently has been the aggressor.

"See there!" cried Caan softly. "Is that perhaps a place where humans live?"

Below us, in the distance ahead, were a number of tiny pin-points of light. And even as Caan spoke, a human figure passed near us—a figure swimming swiftly downward with a fugitive, frightened speed. It seemed to hold a sort of lantern in one of its hands outstretched—a small, shrouded light to guide it through the darkness. It did not see us, and in a moment it had passed downward into the shadows. But the moving point of its light remained visible.

"Come!" urged Caan softly. "That will show us the way. Hurry!"

We swam downward, following the point of light.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE light ahead of us winked like a will-o'-the-wisp as intervening branches of coral, the edge of a mud-bank, or perhaps the body of some living creature, momentarily blotted it out. We were close to the bottom now. Along here it was a rolling, but fairly even bank of ooze, with grotesque squat plants growing in it.

The light could not have been more than a few hundred feet in advance of us; in its glow we could sometimes see the outlines of the human figure carrying it. We did not dare speak aloud now; we swam with that speed and silence which only one who lives in the water can attain.

Presently the light dipped downward and vanished. We saw that this figure we were following had entered a black cave-mouth—an opening which ran diagonally down into a slimy bank of mud. And we saw, too, that the points of steady light which had first attracted our attention were the reflected glow of illumination from somewhere beneath the sea floor.

Silently we slipped into the cave-mouth. The moving light was down there; then abruptly it disappeared.

"Wait!" whispered Caan. "Go slower!"

We advanced, cautiously—and came again to a hedge of coral which impeded our passage. But this barrier we saw at once was artificial. It was the crude doorway—created by human intelligence and industry—which barred the creatures of the wild from entering. We threaded our way through it. Any one of those sea-monsters could have battered it down had he known his strength. But such a knowledge is given only to Man.

Beyond the barrier the dim glow of a diffused green light became visible. We edged cautiously forward, turned a corner, came suddenly to a ledge, and stopped—breathless, with wildly beating hearts.

We were looking down from near the ceiling of a cave. The water filling it was lighted with a pale green radiance, that lent a ghastly, wavering unreality to the scene. The cave might have been several hundred feet in width—nearly circular—and shallow, a hundred feet perhaps from floor to ceiling. The opposite wall to us was plainly visible. It was gouged out with niches in ranks and tiers—shallow ledges like the houses of your ancient, most primitive "Cliff-dwellers." We could see little family groups squatting on many of them—humans, not unlike the Marinoids in form—men, and women, and children.

But it was none of this that caused our hearts to leap so wildly. The floor of this community house was at the moment crowded with human figures. The figure we had followed in was swimming downward to join them. On a raised platform—a shelf of ooze at the side and bottom of the cave—several old men were sitting. They were not Marinoids—but they seemed to differ principally in the eyes, which were much larger and more vacant, and in the pallid, ghastly whiteness of the puffy flesh of their bodies.

On the same platform stood Og! He was gazing down at the throng of people before him—haranguing them. His voice reached us—not Marinoid words, but enough like them—a corruption—to make them intelligible to us.

All this we saw at a brief glance. And the crowning thing: On the platform also, between Og and the white old men, my Nona was sitting with her arms bound at her sides! My Nona, beautiful as always, pink skin, blue eyes and golden hair—so vivid amid that pallid, ghastly throng! And she was unharmed—with spirit unbroken—I could see that by the flash of her eyes, her scornful, unwavering gaze as she leveled it at the puffy white faces staring up at her.

My Nona!

WE CROUCHED there on that upper ledge, staring down through the green water of the cave, and listened to Og as he harangued that pallid, puffy-faced throng. His words came up to us clear—words which, as I have said, were not Marinoid but a corruption of them sufficiently close to the original to be intelligible to us. We listened, breathless. What we heard made the past plain to us; and made our own future—the danger hanging over all the Marinoids—equally plain.

For a moment we forgot our own position there on the ledge—forgot even Nona whom we had come to rescue and who was sitting behind Og on the platform, arms

bound at her sides, with scorn on her beautiful face and her eyes flashing fire at her captors.

For Og, with vehement, enthusiastic words, was explaining to these, his own people, how he would soon lead them into battle against the Marinoids! Rax and its sister cities would be captured; the Marinoid men killed or reduced to slavery; and all the beautiful, peaceful Marinoid domain turned over to the rule and the enjoyment of Og and his people!

It made us shudder; but we held ourselves quiet. Caan, older than Prince Atar and I, pulled us back when in our eagerness to hear Og's every word we would have pressed thoughtlessly forward and risked discovery from below.

These people called themselves Maagogs—two long, very harsh syllables. Down here under the Water of Wild Things, hidden away in caves, mud-holes and subterranean tunnels, there were doubtless thousands of them—dragging out a furtive existence, menaced on every hand by monsters of the deep. To them, Nature herself must have seemed an inexorable enemy, as though their very being were against her laws, her wishes.

For centuries they had apathetically struggled on. And then, as though to blot them out entirely, Nature had turned on them still further. Of recent years the pallid, dull-eyed Maagog women had borne but one female to three males. The Maagog women were dying out; soon the race would become extinct.

With this dearth of women of their kind, Maagog men of the more prepossessing appearance (a generation before) had smuggled themselves into the Marinoid race. Their children — half-breeds — were living there now, with their Maagog heritage unsuspected by the trusting, simple-minded Marinoids.

All this and more, Og explained to the throng of Maagogs he had assembled before him, as he outlined his plans of what he now proposed to do.

"Quiet!" murmured Caan to Atar and me.

Og's voice went on. He had left Rax and come back to the Water of Wild Things because he loved his own people. It had been his idea that they steal the Marinoid women. The Maagog race must go on—on to conquest, to victory!

A cheer rolled out as he said it. But we who listened knew it was Og's own personal advancement—and not love of his people—which actuated him. And his very next words made that plain.

He—Og the Executioner—would lead his people to victory. And he would rule them as King. Og the Executioner! Thus he referred to himself. We did not know at the moment just what he meant. But, as you shall hear, we were soon to learn in very ghastly fashion.

WAR with the Marinoids was coming! Og had sent messengers down with his tidings. The messengers were coming back; and from everywhere came the news that the Maagogs were willing to fight. If their present rulers would urge them on (and here Og turned to the white old men behind him) the Maagog people would mass themselves at Og's command—would follow him against the Marinoids. And when victory had crowned their efforts, he, Og, would rule them in Rax—the most beautiful spot in all the world—where they would all live in peace and security forever. And the beautiful Marinoid women would be their women, and the Marinoid men would be their servants and their slaves!

It was a vigorous, exhilirating speech, and the crowd on the cave-floor responded to it with prolonged cheering, while Og stood silent, smiling upon them triumphantly. Then abruptly he turned toward Nona—my beautiful Nona—who with spirit still unbroken flashed back at him her look of contempt.

And again Og spoke. This woman—this strangely fashioned woman he had found among the Marinoids—would be his Queen—to rule with him when they had conquered Rax. He approached Nona, laid his hand on her shoulder. I started forward; but Caan held me back.

"Quiet, Nemo! Wait! If they discover us, we are lost."

But my Nona did not shrink away from Og. I knew that every fibre of her revolted at his touch—but she did not show it. Her gaze on his face was steady—and full of that same cold contempt.

"This woman," said Og, as he smiled down at the listening throng, "will be your Queen. She is frightened now. She will soon see how great am I—how great is the honor I offer her."

He was talking for Nona's benefit, I knew.

"I respect her," he said. "I shall con-

quer the Marinoids first—and she—her love, her admiration—shall be my reward."

He turned away from Nona, and, advancing to the very edge of the platform, held out his arms to the people.

"I—Og the Executioner—will rule you. The waters we will conquer are fair and beautiful. Cool and open—room for us all—and free of monsters. Riches for every one of you!"

The cheering halted him again. The crowd was waving its thin arms.

"Look!" whispered Atar to me.

From across the cave, a niche halfway up the opposite side, a Maagog woman launched herself into the water, swimming downward toward the platform and Og. She seemed not much older than Nona—a girl not unlike a Marinoid girl, but dead white of flesh. And puffy, with huge staring eyes and a mouth that was a gash.

She swam downward slowly and landed upon the platform close beside Og. He confronted her. She spoke to him, pleadingly—but so softly that we on the ledge could not catch her words. Then she gestured toward Nona; and then she threw her arms about Og's neck. He struggled to release himself, while the crowd, silent now, looked on.

A moment, and Og was free, standing erect. The Maagog girl was lying on the platform where he had thrown her. She rose to her feet painfully, flinging at Nona a glance of unutterable hatred. Then again she appealed to Og—a gesture of love, despairing, desperate. It seemed to madden him. He stepped forward and struck her across the face with the flat of his arm. She fell backward, righted herself in the water, and swam slowly, limpingly away. A moment more, and she was back in the wall niche from whence she had come.

Og, with a scowl, went on talking to the crowd—telling them of the coming Marinoid war. Never once did he look up to where the girl was crouched above, watching him silently.

But I—my gaze was no longer for Og. Across the cave from me—almost at the same level and almost as far from Og and Nona as I was—that Maagog girl crouched tense. There seemed something ominous in every line of her—something that filled me with a dread—a horror.

Og's speech rolled on. The crowd applauded. Atar whispered something to me—something about us three going back to Rax at once, to get help to rescue Nona and to prepare for the coming war.

But I did not heed him. That girl on the rock across the cave was still crouching there. The baleful gaze of her huge eyes was downward to the platform—and my heart leaped into my throat when suddenly I realized that she was staring, not at Og, but at Nona.

And then I saw her hand go to her grotesque green robe. It came back; her pincer held a very short gleaming spear—like a dagger.

The crowd was silent, hanging now on Og's words. Of all that throng, only I was watching that menacing figure on the ledge.

Abruptly the silence was split by a scream — the Maagog girl screaming as though at last her rage and jealousy had broken the bonds of her reason. I saw her dive, head downward—diving and swimming, with the blade extended—straight for Nona!

My own reason left me. I leaped forward, thrust back Caan and Atar who would have stopped me—and plunged from the ledge—plunged downward in a long, swimming dive toward the platform where my Nona sat bound and helpless!

CHAPTER XIX

PLUNGING head downward, it seemed as though the platform, with Og, Nona and the white old men upon it, was sliding swiftly upward at me. To one side, level with me, the Maagog girl was coming down also; we two formed the sides of a V, converging at Nona.

It all happened very quickly; no more than a few seconds went by as I made that downward plunge—yet during that time my head whirled with a thousand frightened thoughts. And one of them stood out predominant. The Maagog girl, in murderous frenzy, would reach Nona first; would stab her to death before I could intervene.

I was conscious that the crowd had fallen silent. Behind me, high overhead now, I heard Atar shouting. Soon the platform was close under me. The Maagog girl, too, was close—unswerving, seeming not to have seen me. A spear, thrown by someone in the crowd—a crude, heavy sort of spear—

came up at me, but I avoided its ponderous flight.

Og in alarm, had slid away; the white old men were cowering. Nona's face was upturned to mine. I twisted sidewise, flung myself at the Maagog girl. Our bodies met; the impact threw us both down upon Nona. The Maagog girl screamed again, but her screams were almost lost in the shouts that now came from everywhere.

I was hardly aware of intercepting the blow of that dagger. It struck my forearm—seared me like a fire-brand. But then I caught the girl's wrist, twisted the weapon from her. She screamed again, screamed with baffled fury. The water around us was white with her struggles.

Atar was beside me! "Quick, Nemo! Nona is free! Nona, come!"

With his spear-edge, Atar had cut Nona's bonds. The Maagog girl was swimming away, still screaming. A figure came at me—a Maagog man, with Og prudently behind him. I plunged the girl's spear into the figure's bulging chest, and waved my spear at Og as the Maagog sank at our feet.

Overhead, Caan was poised in mid-water, shouting defiance at the frightened crowd. I turned. Nona was free! She was mounting upward toward Caan, with Atar covering her retreat.

"Nemo! Nemo!"

It was Nona's voice. Og was backing away, looking for a weapon with which to attack me, and shouting at the crowd to head me off. I mounted after Atar and Nona. Higher up, Caan was now fighting a Maagog who had risen to attack him. Then the Maagog's body slowly sank, with Caan's spear buried in it.

In another moment we were again on the ledge from whence we had come—and my Nona was safe with us! For a brief instant I held her in my arms.

But Caan was dragging us all back into the passageway. Below us the cave was in turmoil. Og had gathered around him a dozen or so who had weapons. They were coming after us! Frightened groups surrounded the bodies of the two we had killed. One of the white old men had recovered himself and was bawling orders. And over it all the Maagog girl was laughing and screaming with hysterical triumph because Nona had escaped Og and was gone.

"Nemo! Come!"

Ahead of us lay the dark passageway with its barrier of coral. Beyond that, another length of passageway upward to the open Water of Wild Things.

We swam hurriedly forward, but my arm was still around my Nona. Soon we were in the coral barrier. Behind us, down the passageway, we could hear Og and the others shouting as they followed us.

We threaded our way through the coral, slowly, laboriously, as one would force a way through the thick frozen underbrush of your winter forests on Earth. But it was a shallow barrier — two hundred feet through, no more.

Again we were in the open passageway; and Og and his party were approaching the barrier from the other side. We hastened onward and upward. It was a short distance only, and we were at the mouth of the tunnel. The open Water of Wild Things loomed before us. Somewhere up there through that inky void was the entrance which would lead us into Marinoid waters.

ATAR gripped me, as with Nona beside me I would have launched myself out of the tunnel-mouth. And I heard Caan's low exclamation of dismay. A light had leaped out of the blackness—a single huge light of green; and then, behind it, a myriad others. Like tiny green stars they dotted the void.

We had no time for conjecture. The darkness out there took shape—a sinuous, serpentine shape. The thing was coming toward us. Its huge head seemed to radiate green fire; the body and tail behind the head were black, but like barnacles, a thousand luminous parasites clung to it, and glowed.

We drew back, but not before the serpent had become aware of us. It turned over with a long, gliding undulation and came at the mouth of the passageway. But it came hastelessly, lazily, as though in its own good time to pick up this food that was offered. I caught a glimpse of opened jaws—fangs half the length of my body. And its breath, a fetid stench, seemed to precede it.

Trembling, we flung ourselves back down the dim tunnel. Ahead through the coral, the vague reflected radiance from the cave was visible. In the coral we could hear Og and his followers, calling to one another as they threaded their way through.

There was no choice. The narrow walls of the passageway hemmed us in; behind us, the serpent was gliding quietly forward. We swam back to the coral. A Maagog forced his way out, and instantly I drove my spear into him. He crumpled with a gasp, and sank in a heap with the spear impaling him from back to chest.

"Nemo!"

I turned, and Nona pushed me to one side. A small black opening was there—an opening at right angles to the main tunnel. It was barely three feet wide and twice as high. Caan and Atar were already in it. Nona glided in, pulling me after her. We swam back a dozen feet and paused. The green head of the serpent was out there in the tunnel we had left; it loomed there a vivid spot of light, at the entrance to this narrow slit which sheltered us—a head too large to enter. It stayed there a moment, and then, as though yielding to the inevitable, it quietly withdrew.

But how far, we did not know. We were terrified and confused. Nona was trembling violently.

"We must go on," said Atar. "Not back there to that—thing."

Ahead of us this narrow, slit-like tunnel seemed to broaden. It was almost black, but not quite, for the mud itself was faintly radiant.

We pressed forward, around a turn to the left, then another to the right. The water in this confined space was foul; it hurt our breathing. We hastened, to get out to the open water as soon as possible. We hoped we would strike it some distance from the mouth of the other passageway—enough to be away from the monster.

How far we went I do not know. Occasionally the tunnel branched, but we always took the larger. We turned several times—ascending, then descending again.

At last a glow showed ahead. The open water, but with a monster on guard there! Our hearts sank.

Abruptly, around a sharp curve, the glow brightened! We slid forward, came to the end of the tunnel. From a tiny, shelf-like ledge, we stared down into the self same cave we had left so precipitately half an hour before! Still up near the ceiling, but now on its opposite side!

CHAPTER XX

HOW can I make clear the dismay, the confusion that swept over us at this unexpected outcome to our supposedly successful escape? What could we do? Retrace our way back through the winding tunnel? There were many diverging passageways: we would lose ourselves hopelessly in this honeycombed mudbank. And before us was the cave, into which we could not venture without the practical certainty of capture.

Too bewildered to do otherwise, we crouched and stared down into the cave. It was less crowded now, but there were still a hundred or more Maagogs on its floor, and dispersed about its wall niches.

Across from us, almost at the same level, was that other ledge on which we had formerly perched. Behind it, its tunnel showed as a small circle of blackness. Perhaps we could swim across the cave unnoticed—get into that other, now familiar, passageway—then through the coral barrier and into the open water... To safety... Unless the monster were still there...

Atar aroused me from these thoughts. He was pointing downward into the cave.

"Nemo. Caan. What is he doing there?"

On the platform, Og and three of the white old men were gathered. Around them, a small school of fishes was swimming. Ten or twenty fishes—short, squat things, two or three feet long, smooth, dull black skins, and with huge distended mouths. For all their size there was about them an aspect of extraordinary strength—their powerful squat build, the alertness of their movements.

My heart almost stopped with the sudden realization that these fishes—or were they fishes?—were not swimming aimlessly, but were waiting for Og's command! Like a pack of trained animals they circled about their master. Then Og called to them. They answered with full-throated, yelping cries! Fishes with voices, you exclaim? You need not be amazed. There are "shouting fishes" even in your own waters of Earth.

Og was bending over the shell where Nona had been bound. The rushes that had bound her and which Atar had cut, were still lying there. At Og's call these swimming creatures gathered around him eagerly. The sound of their voices—yelp-

ing, whining—was blood-curdling. Og was raising up the severed bonds—holding them out; and the fishes were smelling of them!

Then, in a pack they gathered; and Og, leading them, swam with them across the cave up near its ceiling to that other ledge from whence, with Nona, we had made our escape.

The black fishes entered the other passageway, with Og and half a dozen other Maagogs after them. As they swept down into it, their gruesome cries died away into the distance.

You, with your knowledge of similar things, will doubtless think it stupid of us to be puzzled at the meaning of all this—at its danger to us. Yet—we had no way of knowing. We stared at each other, relieved that these ugly black things which uncannily answered Og's commands, had disappeared.

"Nemo! You are hurt!" It was Nona who now had noticed that my arm was bleeding where the Maagog girl's dagger had ripped it.

"Nothing," I said; and I wiped it against my robe.

We tried to plan what we should do. Could we cross the cave? The Maagog girl was still down there, near the platform, with eyes alert to everything around her—eyes that still smouldered with hate and jealous rage. No. To enter the cave would be to court almost certain discovery. We would have to retrace our way—find some other tunnel to lead us out into the open water.

We were starting back, had gone perhaps a hundred yards, when far ahead of us down the narrow passageway, we heard sounds. Yelps! Cries! Whines! Not human—the cries of those squat fishes with their huge slimy jaws!

Panic seized us. We darted back toward the cave. Then forward again, trying to find a side tunnel. But along here there was none.

The yelps grew louder; Og's voice mingled with them. And then, before we could decide in which direction to go, like a pack of eager hounds following a trail and come at last upon their quarry the black fishes swept down upon us. I tried to fight them off—tried to protect Nona. But they darted about me, under me, over me, and gripped me from every side. Teeth like needles, ripping, tearing at my flesh...Og's voice shouting a command... Caan screaming a warning at me... Then something heavy struck my head. Silence and blackness descended upon me.

I RECOVERED consciousness to find myself lying in a bed of mud in a dim, cave-like room. My first sensation was one of heat; the water I was breathing was hot, stifling. My head throbbed.

Nona, Caan and Atar were gathered over me, waiting axiously for me to recover my senses. Nona, hearing my weak voice, seeing my eyes open, threw herself down beside me.

I was not greatly injured. Og had struck me on the head with the flat of his spear. It had cut my scalp and raised an ugly lump. Besides that, the flesh of my legs, arms and shoulders was torn by those fishes' teeth as if by needles.

The plight of Caan, Atar, and even my dear Nona, was similar—but with none of us was it serious.

They told me now, that we were captives. Back there in the tunnel Og had called off his attacking fishes—called them from us or we would have been torn to ribbons. Then, floating me with them, the Maagogs under Og's direction had brought us here to this small room adjacent to the main cave—and left us.

I sat up, then swam a little. I was all right! Nona was all right—we were all safe and sound! My hopes revived. Why should we not now escape?

But none of my companions reflected my jubilant mood.

"Let him look around," said Caan to Atar. Never had I heard Caan speak so sourly, so despondently.

I did look around. We were in a black mud room some forty feet square and half as high. It was bare of furnishings; and lighted overhead by a crude sort of illuminated bladder that gave off a dull green glow. On one side against the black wall were beds, hollowed out of the mud. To *you* they would have looked like shallow graves; and in one of them I had been lying. Across the room was a shelf of mud with a dozen clay seats on it—like a row of huge toadstools.

A third side gave into a tunnel. I approached it eagerly; then drew back shuddering. That pack of blood-hound fishes was out there, circling back and forth, on guard. They saw me, and darted lazily forward. As I stopped, they seemed satisfied,

and went back to their endless circling, following every twist and turn of two or three who seemed to lead them.

Caan laughed cynically. "Not there, Nemo, you see."

My arms went protectingly about Nona, and she drew me wordlessly to the fourth side of the room. The wall here was gone. A grating of woven seaweed like prison bars, took its place. I stood on a precipice, gazing through the bars into a black void of water.

Can I make you understand the shuddering fear that possessed me? This water out there was moving swiftly downward, like a torrent, or a subterranean waterfall. Its current, drawing the water out of the room, flattened me involuntarily against the bars.

I had never seen swiftly moving water before. I felt as *you* would feel gazing from a great height into a dizzy abyss. And this water I could see, was boiling hot down there. But for those bars, I should have been whirled down into it! And from far below I could hear a faint sizzling, as of water dropped on a bed of embers.

I forced myself away from the grating, back into the center of the room; and now I was aware that all the water in the room was coming from the tunnel and passing in a current through those bars.

"You see," said Atar, trying to speak calmly. "You see now—"

But Og abruptly entered from the tunnel. He hovered before us, leering. Nona shrank against me, and I folded her in my arms.

Og did not glance at Nona. He said to Caan: "Have you decided?"

"No," Caan answered. "He is but this moment recovered. We—"

"Tell him now. I will wait." Og turned away, swam over to the grating and gazed through it to that boiling, tumbling water.

Then Caan told me. Og offered us freedom—us three men. He would send us back to Rax. The price of it was Nona's promise to be his Queen—a willing, smiling Queen, none other would the Maagogs have.

I could feel Nona shudder against me, but she said no word.

"No!" I shouted. "No! No!"

Og heard me and smiled. "There is another way. Tell him, Caan."

And if we did not agree—if Nona did not give her promise—Og, the Executioner, would open the grating and let us three men slip out—down into that boiling water our helpless bodies would be sucked...

As Caan said it, my Nona burst out: "And Nona, too. *That* is best."

But even that, Og heard. "No," he smiled. "Not Nona. She will stay here with me—to rule as Queen when I have coaxed the smiles back to her pretty face."

I was suddenly aware of another figure in the room. That Maagog girl had slipped in from the tunnel. She heard Og's words. Her face smouldered with fury; but it was Nona, not Og, at whom she gazed so balefully. And I knew then that if ever Nona were left with Og—if we men were killed—this woman would kill Nona if she could.

Og faced the girl.

"Well, Maaret? Why do you come here?" He addressed her gruffly. "Did I not tell you to stay away?"

She gestured behind her. "The time is on us. They are ready—coming now. And Og, I knew that you had forgotten."

Og grinned. "Yes, girl, you speak well—I had forgotten." It was doubtless very amusing; he was chuckling as he whirled on us who were hovering in a huddled group. "A fortunate occurrence, my friends from Rax. You shall swim aside now—and watch me as I perform this little duty of mine. You shall see how cleverly, how gracefully I do it."

He was still grinning; his voice was ironical, mocking—but his eyes were gleaming at Nona. "It will help *you* to decide, my Queen—help you to choose the fate of your Nemo, your little toy Prince Atar, and your Caan the shell-gatherer!"

There were sounds in the tunnel now—a low wailing, monotonous, like a chant, a dirge. Og waved us imperiously away. Maaret, the Maagog girl, led us to the side of the room near the grating. We followed her, but I kept myself between her and Nona. And there, flattened against the mud wall, we watched and listened.

THE wailing swelled in volume, then ceased abruptly. From the tunnel a line of figures came swimming—Maagog women, eight of them. Each held a child; an infant hugged to the mother breast; two or three older little boys dangling in the water held by the mother's hand; and one, a boy almost half grown, swimming close by his mother's side.

The children were all naked—puffed, dead-white little things, with goggling eyes

and gaping mouths. One or two were crying.

The line slowly passed me, swung about, and went to the platform. On that row of toadstool seats the mothers took their places. They sat there drooping, hugging their children. The older boy huddled against his mother's knees; his face, turned my way, showed great, staring eyes, dark with a terror but half understood. He was whimpering a little, but his mother silenced him with a low-spoken word.

Og, swimming slowly, went the length of the line, counting the women, searching their faces and the faces of the children. Evidently he was satisfied that all who should be, were there.

"You are ready?" he said.

My gaze, following his, swept the line. A woman sobbed; another clutched her infant hungrily; but they all nodded assent.

"You first," said Og abruptly. He darted an arm at one of the women. A tremor shook her; a shudder; but obediently she held out her infant to Og. He took it, swam with it to the grating, and opened a little gateway that was there.

As he held the infant poised, his glance turned to me; his eyes were grinning sardonically. Atar was cursing softly. I started forward, but Caan held me back.

"No use, Nemo!"

Og's arms went up; he slid the infant through the little gateway. I heard its mother scream; but my eyes, fascinated, were on that black, tumbling void of water.

The baby's body, caught by the current, floated out and downward—slowly at first, then more swiftly. Gradually it turned over... An infant face—big eyes full of staring surprise...a puny wail of protest as the water grew hotter...

Down it went, whirling now—a tiny white blob...white, then pink—then turning red...

I sank back, sick and faint. And Nona, who had not looked, whispered tremblingly to me the meaning of it all. There were too many male children being born to the Maagogs—too many useless mouths to feed. After each tenth time of sleep, male children were drawn by lot in the different community houses and sent up here to this death chamber for execution.

Og the Executioner! How efficiently, with a smile on his lips, he performed his grisly duty!

You read of this with a shudder perhaps? You marvel that in even so remote a hole of the Universe as this Water of Wild Things in the bowels of my little meteor, such ghastly, inhuman things should take place? You forget. Can you not recall that on your own fair Earth, not so very long ago, they cast infant girl-babies into the sacrificial waters of the Granges, to the hungry, eager jaws of the crocodiles?

I did not look again. Occasionally there was a sob—a scream; once, a brief, despairing scuffle as some mother found the ordeal beyond her strength. The little half-grown boy, as he passed me with Og's hand in his, gazed at me with a dumb, terrified appeal ...I hated myself as I looked away...

Then—it was all over. The little gateway was replaced. The mothers—empty-armed—swam silently out into the tunnel, through the parted ranks of those alert-eyed, guarding fishes.

Maaret, the girl, had disappeared. Og was again alone with us. His lips were leering triumphantly.

"You see how well I do my work? Quickly—without confusion." The leer abruptly faded into grim menace; his eyes blazed at us.

"You may take your choice. The hot water, there—" His gesture was to the grating—"Or the cool, sweet water of Rax. But in either case, Nona shall be my Queen."

He turned away. At the tunnel entrance, he paused. "Soon I shall come back for your answer."

He was gone.

CHAPTER XXI

WHAT were we to do? With such a choice, what could we say? Soon Og would return for his answer! The water of the cave still seemed ringing with his grim, sardonic voice.

Hopelessly we sat down for discussion. Nona sat on one of the seats where but a few moments before a Maagog mother had dropped and yielded up her infant to the boiling torrent beyond the grating. I shuddered and pulled Nona away. On the floor, near the center of the cave, we gathered in a huddled group. I braced my feet in the mud, for the current pressed us toward that ghastly grating, beyond which lay death.

The cave was silent save for the sinister hiss of steam beneath it. In the lurid

green glow of the lamp overhead our faces were livid, death-like. Death hung all about us. An unseen, imponderable spectre, it seemed to lurk in the very water we breathed.

We were alone—yet not alone either. At the tunnel-mouth those squat black fishes circled back and forth on guard. Occasionally two or three would enter the cave. Poised before us, their eyes seemed gauging us. Uncanny eyes! Eyes almost like those of an intelligent dog whose master has set him to guard an enemy and who is watching suspiciously, expectantly, that enemy's every move. We lowered our voices subconsciously, as though fearing that the black fishes would hear us and understand.

At first we had little to say. It was all so hopeless. We could not allow Og to return us to Rax and yield up Nona to him. That was unthinkable. And yet, if we did not— The memory of those infants' bodies as they slid downward into the boiling torrent made us shudder with a fear that is implanted deep in every human heart.

Cowards? I do not think you could call us that. But the man who tells you he has faced death—in a calm moment of physical inactivity—without fear, is a liar.

We were all of us afraid, numbed, confused. Abruptly Atar laughed. But his laugh was hollow.

"We must plan something," he said. "We sit here like terrified children."

It was Caan who outlined the situation for us. "Og," he said, "undoubtedly wanted us to accept freedom. He could easily kill us now and keep Nona; but he wanted Nona's promise to be his willing, smiling queen. None other would the Maagogs have."

We could, therefore, count upon Og's returning us three men to Rax, if that were our choice. But could we? It was I who voiced the question. Caan had suggested that possibly we could get to Rax and return at once with others to help us rescue Nona.

"How do we know that Og will not betray us at the last moment?" I demanded. "How easily can he take us to the entrance to Marinoid waters, and there murder us! Returning here, he would tell Nona we were safe in Rax, and hold her to her promise."

It was thus, doubtless, the crafty Og was planning. He wanted Nona's promise—and yet certainly he would not want us three men back in Rax, with our knowledge of the Maagog plans, and of the coming war.

Then Nona herself suggested a possible way out of our desperate situation.

"I shall tell Og," she cried, "that we cannot be sure he will live up to his promise. If he returns you to Rax, I will agree to be his queen. His smiling queen." She shuddered, and her body pressed against mine. "I shall tell him that. And, Nemo, do you not understand? I shall tell him he must take me also to the Marinoid entrance so that I may see you three swim safely into Marinoid waters. He will do that, no douht. And there—at the last moment — you will fight — we will all fight."

Her white face turned to me; her beautiful lips were pressed grimly together. "Fight, my Nemo! Then we shall escape—if we can surprise him. Or at least we shall all die together."

To such a desperate plan our despair forced us. It seemed the only way. We discussed it—for how long I cannot say. And then, abruptly we saw Og again in the tunnel-mouth. The black fishes were swarming about him—fawning upon him with their grewsome whines of pleasure. He stopped to stroke one of them.

"You have decided?" he said to us.

"Yes," said Atar.

Fear seemed to have dropped from our young prince. For the first time since we left Rax, he dominated Caan and me. He stood now fronting Og unflinching—his face white and set, his eyes smouldering.

But his lips were smiling. "We do not desire death," he said. "We will return to Rax, and she will give the promise you ask."

He turned to Nona, signing her to speak. "You will trust him to send us safely to Rax?" he added.

"No!" cried Nona. And she added, with a flow of woman's words, the proposal we had planned—her insistence that she be taken along to see us safely into Marinoid waters.

Og listened silently. Then he gazed from one to the other of us. The crafty smile on his face made my heart sink.

"You think perhaps to escape with her on the journey?" he suggested. And when

we did not answer, his arm waved away the idea. "I shall take care that you do not." Then to Nona: "You speak well, my queen. For your promise I will do much. You shall go."

AGAIN he was silent, pondering. I could almost see some new murderous scheme taking form in his brain. He added suddenly:

"Of course, you shall go, Queen of the Maagogs, if that is your wish."

He turned toward the tunnel-mouth. The black fishes were crowded there, staring at us. Og's sardonic laugh rang out.

"Patience, little black ones. You will go with us, of course. You will go to see that my queen does not escape me!"

He swung back to Atar, and said curtly: "During the next sleep time we will start. The Maagogs—some of them—think I ought to kill you now—not send you back to Rax. We will leave while they are asleep—to avoid trouble. I shall come for you then."

He bowed ironically to Nona, swam to the tunnel-mouth, and with a parting admonition to the fishes gathered there, he disappeared.

Again we were alone. Our plans already had miscarried. We realized it. As though our thoughts had been written on our faces, Og had understood our purpose. There would be no chance for us to escape with Nona. The black fishes were going with us. And during that coming journey, we knew Og intended to kill us men—kill us and still make Nona think we were safe—hold her to her promise.

Time passed. The warm water of the cave oppressed us—yet we were all cold with fear and despair. The very silence of the room seemed sinister—that tense silence that urges one to scream. We were not talking now—we were thinking—planning a thousand desperate, impractical plans, all of which seemed to mean nothing but death for us men, and worse than death for Nona. It must be now the Time of Sleep . . . Og would be back soon . . . I held my Nona close—waiting. . . .

In the tunnel a dim human figure appeared, taking shape out of the distant blackness of the passageway. It was swimming swiftly but silently toward us. Through the moving ranks of the black fishes circling there, it threaded its way.

But it was not Og! And then we saw it was a woman—a Maagog woman—Maaret, the girl!

Nona was nearest to the tunnel. I flung myself forward to protect her. But just inside our cave Maaret stopped. Her furtive glance swept the tunnel behind her.

Then she turned to me. And her gesture warned us all to be silent!

CHAPTER XXII

MAARET'S voice when she spoke was low, cautious. We listened to her swift words, our hearts pounding with sudden hope. She said she had come to save us! Her motive was clear; we already understood it. Yet she told us it, briefly, and with a direct simplicity that carried the conviction of truth.

Since Og had returned from living in Rax (after his combat with me) Maaret had belonged to him. She loved him. Then had come this woman Nona. Maaret's gaze swept my poor innocent Nona with hatred. This woman Nona, she said, had (with her strange, uncanny looks which Og thought were beauty) won Og from her.

In brief, Maaret wished only that we all—with Nona—return to Rax. Then perhaps she could make Og love her again. Our escape, taking Nona with us, was all she desired.

"Or the death of all of us," Caan suggested. And his look to me was significant.

Maaret gestured vehemently. "That, of course," she admitted frankly. "The black fishes I would set upon you now. But your screams would bring Og. You would not die. I should lose him by that way."

She seemed indeed sincere. She said she could command the black fishes. She would take them away—lock them up. And then we could escape. But we must hurry. It was already the Time of Sleep. At any moment Og would be here.

We consulted; Maaret swam to the mouth of the passageway and gazed anxiously into it.

"Can we trust her?" Caan demanded. "Will she not let us start, perhaps, and then set the black fishes upon us?"

It was possible; and yet we had to trust her.

Atar called her back. "Which way do we go? We will get lost, girl. Will you go with us, until we get to open water?"

She would not. If Og knew what she had done he would kill her. But we could easily find our way. This tunnel led into the main cave. Everyone there would be asleep at this hour. We could slip unnoticed across the cave, up to that ledge and into that other tunnel which was familiar to us. From there we knew our way—through the shallow coral barrier, and up into the open Water of Wild Things.

"A monster may be there at the tunnel entrance," I suggested.

She admitted it, but of that we had to take our chance.

"The girl speaks truth," Atar said suddenly. "I like her. I believe her."

Maaret's smile answered him, but her worried gaze was still on the passageway by which at any moment now Og might arrive.

"We must go," agreed Nona. And then she startled us all. She swam to Maaret.

"You are good," she said. "I would not harm you."

But Maaret shrank away. "You take my Og."

"I do not want your Og."

We were all so relieved at the turn affairs had taken that we found ourselves smiling.

"She is your friend, Maaret," I said. "She loves me—she is my woman—and Boy is our son. She does not want your Og. She wants only to get back to Rax with me. She wants never to see Og again."

The girl nodded, only half convinced. Indeed, I suppose her attitude toward Nona was only natural.

"Come," Maaret urged. "At any moment it will be too late."

We followed her reluctantly. At our approach the black fishes surged upon us. But Maaret held them in check. They obeyed her low-toned but stern commands. Yet they seemed to sense that something was wrong. Two or three of them dashed at me threateningly. Their low rumbling voices were like the snarls of an enraged dog. In panic, I kicked at them. Then Maaret's command called them off.

We were all in the passageway, in the very midst of the fishes. A side doorway was there—a doorway into a large cage of water. The doorway was barred by a grating. Maaret removed it and began herding the fishes into the cage. They were all in but the last three or four, when abruptly we heard Og's voice from out of the dimness along the passageway! His voice—shouting with surprise and anger. And his figure appeared, plunging at us!

CAAN shouted an admonition which none of us heeded. Atar dove for Og. I was vaguely aware that Maaret with presence of mind had jammed back the grating into place, locking all but three of the fishes in the cage. I heard her low cry of dismay. Og seemed not to have seen her, and she sank into a shadow by the wall—out of sight.

Then Nona's voice urged me forward. Og and Atar were grappling with each other. Og rasped out an order; and the three black fishes rushed for Caan and me. I struck at one, to keep it away from Nona. The needle teeth of another sank into my leg, and clung. With my bare hands I reached down and gripped the thing by the body. Its black skin was slimy; its teeth in the flesh of my calf were like fire.

Caan, Atar and Og were shouting. The noise would bring help for Og!

"Quiet!" I called. I tried to lunge forward with that thing still clinging to my leg.

Atar and Caan fell silent. But Og's voice rose higher than ever. I did not know exactly what was going on; the water over there was in a turmoil.

Nona was beside me. Her fingers were feeling of the black fish, trying to help me tear it loose. Then I found its jaws; pulled them apart. It lunged away from me. I swung up into the water and looked about.

Atar and Og were still fighting. Caan had shocked two of the fishes into insensibility. Old as he was, he still possessed sufficient power to stun them. The third fish—the one I had repulsed—made for him. I left Nona and dove forward toward Og and Atar. They were circling each other, both trying to get into position to give the electric shock.

Then, from out of the shadows beside them, a figure appeared, lurking there silently. Maaret! I had forgotten her.

Og suddenly gripped Atar by the ankles. I saw that he had Atar almost in the fatal position to receive the shock. But I was too far away to stop it.

I called a warning. But Atar seemed confused. And then I saw Maaret slide silently forward. She kept behind Og,

where he could not see her. In her hand she held something white—a heavy shell, or something of the kind. It swung through the water, struck Og on the head. He relaxed from Atar; his unconscious body sank to the floor of the passageway.

Caan had by now disposed of the other fish. Atar joined us, panting from his exertions. We were all free to escape.

"Come!" exclaimed Caan. "The cave will be aroused! We must hurry."

Maaret was crouching over Og's stunned body. Her arms were around him; she was crying softly.

"Go!" she said angrily. And ignoring us, she fell to caressing Og. Frightened at what she had done, she was begging him to open his eyes—speak to her—tell her he was not badly hurt.

We hastened away. It was not far to the cave. We dashed into it, recklessly. It was more dimly lighted than when we had last seen it. The main floor was empty. There were family groups in most of the wall niches. Many of them were still asleep. Others, awakened, were looking sleepily about for the cause of the distant disturbance.

We dashed without pause up into the cave. The familiar ledge and tunnel-mouth were easy to locate. The Maagogs saw us. An uproar arose. But before any concerted effort to stop us could be made, we were up across the cave, over the ledge and into the tunnel.

"Safe!" exclaimed Atar. "Hurry!"

There were shouts behind us. But—without Og and the black fishes—we did not fear any of the Maagogs who might try and follow us.

We were soon through the coral barrier. Another few moments and we were at the main tunnel-mouth. The open Water of Wild Things stretched above us. For a moment we hesitated, looking cautiously up there. But no monsters were in sight.

"Soon we will be in Rax," I murmured exultantly to Nona. And her loving arms went around me.

Caan was looking back down the passageway. "Nemo, you hear that?"

OUR blood ran cold. In the distance, back toward the cave, we could hear those horrible yelping cries! Og had recovered! He had let loose the black fishes upon our trail! They could outswim us. We could not hide from them. And this time when they caught us, Og would not call them off!

There was nothing to do but try and get across the Water of Wild Things before we were overtaken. The way before us was open. Every second we hesitated made our chances less.

W plunged up into the black void. Swimming in couples, Nona and I followed Caan and Atar. They led us close along the sea-bottom. Coming in, Caan had been careful to remark the lay of the bottom so that he could find his way back.

We swam fast, too fast for talking save an occasional monosyllable. Behind us we could hear the cries of our pursuers. Growing louder, steadily, but slowly. It was a stern chase, and if we could hold our present speed—a long chase.

On we swept, just above the sea-bottom. Occasionally giant crabs would scuttle away from us, alarmed by our swift movement. To the sides, lights sometimes showed—the lighted heads of monsters. But none came near us. A thing all spines drifted past; but it did not molest us. A giant clam, larger far than any one of us, was lying on the seabottom in our path. It opened its shells as though hungrily to suck us in, but we avoided it. We came at last to the side wall of the black void of water—the wall alongside of which we had descended. Up there, a few thousand feet, lay the entrance to the Marinoid domain. If we could get into that entrance—into the coral forest before the black fishes caught us. . . .

We swam upward, along the line of wall, a few hundred feet off. Directly beneath us now, following every twist of our trail, the pursuing fishes were yelping. They were much closer. And Nona was tiring! It was the longest, most sustained fast swimming she or I had ever attempted. Atar and Caan were drawing away from us. They did not realize it, and I did not call to them. Perhaps, if we two gave out, they could go on and save themselves.

Then Caan looked back. They slackened their pace and we caught up with them.

"Go—on," I panted.

But they would not go faster than we could go. And we all knew that very soon now we would be caught.

We were perhaps two thirds the way up the wall when suddenly Caan and Atar swung sharply out to one side. Nona and I followed, as one fish follows the

turns and twists of another. I looked to see what was wrong. Overhead, directly in our former path, loomed the black, unlighted bulk of a giant monster, huge and fearsome beyond anything we had ever before encountered!

CHAPTER XXIII

WE HAD no time to decide what we should do. The monster saw us. Beneath us—almost in sight now—the black fishes were mounting. And further below them—dim and muffled in the distance—we heard Og's voice shouting a shrill command to urge them on.

We darted out sidewise, away from the wall. Atar was leading, and single-file, we others followed. Then Atar turned suddenly and doubled back upon himself. Strung out in a line, we turned with him. Making straight for the jagged cliff-face, we passed close under the monster, between it and the mounting black fishes.

The monster was slow, ponderous in its movements. It was coming down, and as we darted under it I stared up and saw it plainly. A gigantic black thing. A spherical head, twenty feet broad; a thick, elongated body—a hundred feet or more in length. There were no fins, and no tail. The head had two great protruding eyes, gleaming green, and beneath them a circular mouth—a mouth which even undistended was large enough to suck in our bodies. And around the head, fastened to it—framing the face—were a dozen arms! They were waving tentacles with a sucker disk at the end of some, and a hook at the end of others.

A squid! you perhaps explain. It was, indeed, fashioned somewhat after the plan of the squid of your earthly waters. Let me call it then, a squid. It came down ponderously, waving its tentacles and floundering with its unwieldy body.

Avoiding it, we struck the cliff-face. A depression was there—a sort of ledge. On it we huddled, panting; Nona and I were almost exhausted.

"We must go on!" Caan whispered. "The black fishes—they will find us. And that giant thing—it can suck us up—"

But Atar silenced him. Atar knew what he was doing. And most of all, this momentary inactivity was allowing Nona and me to rest. We could not have gone much further in any event.

The giant squid had swung awkwardly to follow us. Then evidently it heard the yelps of the uprushing fishes. It hesitated, turned downward; it was below us, and out from the wall, but still in plain sight; and we saw the black fishes sweep up to attack it.

On every side the monster was assailed. There must have been two hundred or more of those ugly, squat little things. The bulk of the squid dwarfed them into insignificance; but like bull terriers worrying a prostrate elephant, they tore at it.

The squid floundered. Its lashing tentacles hooked the fishes and flung them away. Its mouth sucked them in and swallowed them. But scores of the fishes gripped the tentacles and clung; others bit and tore at the soft, puffy flesh; still others swarmed at the monster's protruding eyes, gouging them. . . .

The squid was in distress. It pulled itself to the wall below us and clung with its suckers. Then it let go, and ejecting a great stream of water from its mouth, forced itself swiftly backward. But the swarm of fishes still tore at it. One of its eyes went out. Its lacerated flesh gave a stench to the water that sickened us. . . .

Caan was plucking at me. "We must go—now while we have the chance. Og may call his fishes—set them on us—"

Where was Og? I had forgotten him. He had fled, doubtless. Then we heard his voice. He was hovering off in the open water; we heard him screaming angrily to the fishes, trying to call them off the squid—to set them again on our trail.

We started upward, close to the cliff-face. Og would not see us perhaps.

"Faster!" urged Caan. "We swim like children."

Atar again led us in single file. I was last, swimming just after Nona. I turned to look downward. The squid was lashing the water in desperate fury. The fishes, many of them, were floating downward—inert. But many others, ignoring Og's commands in their lust for blood, were still attacking. I saw Og now, well off to one side. A dozen or so of the fishes were gathered around him.

The water down there by the squid was lashed white. It caught what light there was and I could see everything plainly. Then, as the squid rolled over with a last despairing effort, I saw a great stream of inky black fluid issue from it.

The ink spread. Everything turned to blackness. The squid, as a last desperate measure, had emptied its inkbag and under cover of the darkness was trying to escape. The water down there was a bowl of ink, out of which came the snarls of the fishes, and Og's shrill voice shouting commands.

We mounted swiftly, for Nona and I were refreshed by our brief rest. Soon we were within sight of the horizontal slit in the cliff—the entrance to home! But again beneath us, we heard Og's shouts and the deep-throated cries. They were after us.

Atar, leading us, abruptly stopped. My heart leaped to my throat. Was it another monster ahead? It was something. There was something sweeping toward us! Not slowly, ponderously this time—but swift almost as a thrown spear! From up near the horizontal passage we saw it coming—small, a dim blob at first, with a little V-shaped white wake behind it. Larger, closer—a few seconds only, while we huddled together, wholly confused.

Turning in an arc, this new thing swept at us—slowed down its flight, and stopped beside us. We shouted with the relief of hysteria. It was our Marinoid King—Atar's father—alone in his sleigh, driving his dolphin-like animal which could pull it faster than any of us could swim.

We were safe!

INTO the sleigh we climbed. Nona sat in the seat beside the king. Og and his black fishes were approaching; but we were away, gliding through the water with a speed that soon outdistanced them.

The sleigh itself was constructed to be slightly heavier than water, so that it could glide along the sea-bottom. But now it was buoyed by tiny air-pods fastened to it, so that of itself it would neither float nor sink. We started away after no more than the briefest of grec 'ngs with our king. We three men clung to the rim of the sleigh behind. Its rapid motion threw our bodies out horizontally, like men clinging to the tail of a speeding airplane in the rush of air.

Never before had I moved through water so fast. It roared in my ears, blurred my sight, and choked me. Dimly I saw the passageway speeding past beside us. We were paralleling it; not entering, but heading for its further end.

Then we seemed to go still faster. I coughed, choked. The press of water against my mouth stifled my breathing. My lungs were full and I could not exhale. I heard Atar's voice—a shout: "Nemo—your arm—put it—before your face! You—"

The rushing water tore away his words. But I understood. I clung with my right hand to the sleigh; with my left arm crooked before my face, in the back-eddy of water behind it, I breathed again. And then I saw that all the others were doing the same. Had I not done it, I should have been drowned—as *you* perhaps have choked a fish to death by towing it rapidly through water.

We dashed onward, with the water roaring past. Then in a gentle arc we swung to the left and slackened to normal swimming speed. A mud-ooze floor was close under us; a ceiling came down overhead. We were in the slit, headed for the coral forest. The coral barrier! I gasped as I thought of it. How had the King come through that barrier with his sleigh?

I was now crouching, clinging to the sleigh at Nona's side. I asked the question, but no one heard me. They were all talking.

The King had an arm about my Nona, paternally, affectionately. "I am glad you are safely returned, my child."

Atar was asking: "My father—what made you come for us?"

The King answered very gravely: "Your mother—she was worried, Atar." His eyes were laughing. "I had to slip away, unseen in the Time of Sleep. Our people would not like their monarch dashing off alone to possible danger. But though I am an old man, there is lust for fighting in me yet."

Then I made my question heard. The King sobered instantly.

"Much is coming to pass in Rax—strange things I learn every hour—and all of danger to us and our people."

He told us then that upon the heels of our own departure into the Water of Wild Things (it had been two eating times before, as I well knew by the hunger which possessed me) the Marinoid guards had noticed an open swathe cut through the coral forest. They found it, and reported it to the King—a thirty-foot-wide lane. Evidently it had been recently done by the Maagogs. In our own hasty search for an entrance, we three had overlooked it.

The King, hearing that, had decided to drive a short distance in to the Water of Wild Things and look for our return.

As he spoke, our sleigh reached the coral

forest. We passed along it a short distance, and arrived at a grating thirty feet square. The situation was now plain to us, and hastily we told the King what we had learned from the Maagogs. Og, sure of the coming war and his own leadership, was preparing to strike at once. He had this lane cut through the coral to give free passage to his Maagog army in its attack on Rax. This grating Og had put there to keep the monsters from wandering into Marinoid waters. He was going to conquer those waters—and he wanted no monsters there to harass the future of the victorious Maagogs.

The grating was easily removable. The King had swung it aside to get his sleigh past; and we swung it now, to return. Soon we were speeding out across the cool, sweet Marinoid waters. They were dim with twilight. Peaceful, beautiful, a Garden of Paradise to us, returning now from that foul Water of Wild Things.

It was still the Time of Sleep in Rax when we arrived. Quietly, unobtrusively, we slipped unnoticed into the city.

And Nona was again with Boy! The joy of it! I am a mere man; I cannot describe—I know I cannot even appreciate—how my Nona felt to hold Boy again to her breast; to feel his baby arms about her neck; to hear his gleeful, welcoming cries. Only a mother can understand; and I, a man, could but stand and watch, and wonder.

CHAPTER XXIV

THOSE next three days in Rax—the three days immediately following our return from the Water of Wild Things—were critical. We did, indeed, have but little time for sleep. We were exhausted when we returned—Nona and I. We played with Boy a little; and then, with him beside us lustily practicing his newly learned swimming strokes, we fell into deep slumber.

Atar awakened us. The city, he said, was seething with excitement. Our return was already known. Rumor of danger—nobody knew just what—was on every tongue.

Atar was pale, but composed. "Strange things are impending, Nemo. Very strange. And ominous—frightening. My father bids me bring you to him now."

He said it so ceremoniously, so solemnly, that his tone alarmed me more than the words. I sat him down and he waited impatiently while Nona hastily prepared us food. Then—with Nona and Boy—we swam past Caan's house. Nona and Boy stayed there; I would not again leave them alone. Then Atar and I went on, swimming slowly through the city streets toward the King's palace.

The city was indeed in turmoil. I wondered how the news of our return had spread so swiftly. To do anything secretly of public interest and importance is difficult. And yet how should the Marinoids know already that danger was all about us in the water? How could they know that war with the Maagogs was impending? The city knew it; rumor of it was everywhere.

The streets had almost a holiday aspect. At every intersection groups of swimmers were gathered. Passersby were hurrying to and fro, aimlessly. Women cluttered the balconies. A holiday aspect, did I say? It was not that. The crowds hung poised, talking in low tones; the swimmers gazed often behind them apprehensively; the women on the balconies stared down with solemn, frightened eyes—and hushed their children with over-stern commands. Terror, not joy, was in the water that morning—a nameless terror, born of the Unknown.

I whispered something of the kind to Atar.

"Soon they will know what the danger is," he answered. "Then will come enthusiasm, the desire to fight. The terror will be forgotten. Father's speech to them will fix that."

"Yes," I said. "We must give them that, or we are lost."

As we swam forward through the streets, the people recognized us. Occasionally a few would cheer; but for the most part they stared at us silently. Some followed us; soon there would have been a crowd in line behind us, but Atar dispersed them imperiously.

"Atar! Look there!"

In a doorway a figure was lurking. A man. I recognized him. He had never married; and I remembered that they said no Marinoid girl would take him for mate because of his Maagog origin.

The half-breeds! I have so far mentioned them but casually. With both Marinoid and Maagog blood, they were called Marinogs—a term they resented heartily. I had never given them much thought, had never known nor cared how many of them there might

be. But now, as you shall hear, we were soon to deal with them in tragic fashion.

The Marinog in the doorway stood motionless. And as we passed, I felt his inscrutable gaze upon us. Something in it made me shiver, and I turned and looked back to him. He was still staring—his face wholly expressionless.

Atar pulled me on. As we approached the King's palace, the throngs in the streets grew denser. They cheered us more frequently now. But among them, everywhere, I saw Marinogs—whiter, puffy of flesh, with larger eyes. Those were the real half-breeds. But I wondered how many there might prove to be among us with that unseen, unmarked taint of Maagog blood.

The crowds cheered—but the Marinogs were silent. They swam about furtively; or lurked in doorways; or in tangles of the street vegetation here and there. And always I felt their stolid gaze upon Atar and me.

We entered the upper palace doorway, at the threshold of which the dolphin sleigh lay waiting on the platform. In a broad low room, brightly lighted by rows of pods at its ceiling, the King greeted us. He was seated in a shell, on a throne built of smaller shells cemented together.

Save for him, the apartment was empty. He kept his seat, and we reclined on the platform at his feet. Outside we could hear the murmurs of the gathering crowd.

"You must speak to them soon, my father," said Atar.

The King nodded. He was very grave, perturbed inwardly I knew; but outwardly solemn and grim. Then, suddenly discarding his reserve, he talked to me as though I were his son. For generations, he said, this secret mingling of Marinoid and Maagog blood had been a source of concern to the Government at Rax. There were no more than a few hundred known half-breeds in each of the Marinoid cities. The Marinoid women were averse to mating with them. Yet, nevertheless, thousands perhaps of the Marinoids were tainted. There were two reasons for this. First: Some of the Maagog men who had smuggled themselves in, looked enough like Marinoids to pass unrecognized. And secondly: There were immoral Marinoid women in all the cities.

"Why, there may be several thousand of these Marinogs—these half-breeds," I exclaimed. "But why should they all turn against us?"

PROPHETIC thought! We did not know then that the Marinogs *would* turn against us. And yet we feared it. They were looked down upon—scorned.

Though we did not know it then, our fears were all too well founded. Og had already sent emissaries from the Water of Wild Things. One by one they had smuggled themselves through the coral barrier and into the Marinoid cities. It was they who were spreading the rumors of coming war. Their insidious talk was inciting the half-breeds. They were telling the half-breeds that this was the beginning of a new era. The Maagogs soon would rule in Rax. The despised half-breeds then would take their place as rightful, honored leaders. The Marinoid women — those beautiful women who always had scorned them—would be their slaves.

The King long had feared such conditions as these which now were coming to pass; and he told his fears to me frankly. Then he smiled.

"You have thought me unprepared, Nemo," he added. "I am—for this sudden crisis—and yet not wholly so."

Then he told me that for most of his reign—all Atar's life, in fact—he had maintained a secret cavern in Marinoid waters, where preparations for war were going forward. I had not known that. Caan even now did not know it. The strictest secrecy was maintained, for above everything the half-breeds and Maagogs had to be kept in ignorance of it. The cavern was not far from Rax. It was well guarded; and no one had ever been in it, or heard of it, save a few of those known to be of full and loyal Marinoid blood.

"Not wholly unprepared, Nemo," the King repeated. "After the next Time of Sleep I will take you to the cavern. If this Og will only delay a little—"

A noise outside the palace interrupted him. For some moments I had been conscious of a growing murmur, a confusion; which now broke out into cheers.

The King swam from his seat and we followed him across the room. Through a doorway upward, we emerged to the palace roof-top. It was empty, but in the foliage overhead figures were clinging; and I saw that the whole open cube of water before the palace was cluttered with them.

The shaded lights along the parapet were lighted, flinging their greenish beams outward and leaving the roof in shadow. A

great cheer rolled out as we appeared. The King advanced to the parapet; and at his low-toned command, Atar turned several of of the lights to shine full upon him. He stood there facing the throng; his figure, thrown into bold relief by the light upon it.

The cheering continued. Figures fluttered overhead, seeking places of vantage. Then silence fell; and extending his four arms outward to his people, the King spoke.

ATAR and I crouched in the shadows at the King's feet; but between two of the illuminated pods, I could see plainly the green-glowing water before us, with its silent, expectant throng of faces.

The King spoke slowly, carefully at first. Gradually his voice. rose in power; the smile faded from his face. With grim, forceful words, he told of the Maagog peril —bid all his loyal subjects hold themselves ready for his commands.

A burst of cheering interrupted him. The crowd waved its arms; in the confusion many of the spectators overhead lost their holds, or were crowded from their places.

Then again silence fell over the water. And in the silence a single voice shouted two words. A female voice—the shrill voice of some Marinoid girl.

"Loyal subjects!"

She called it out cynically, quoting it from the King's last sentence. She was directly across the water from me; I saw her plainly—a girl who was considered one of the beauties of Rax. A half-breed man was passing near her, and obviously she was aiming the taunt at him.

"Loyal subjects!"

And then she added: "That does not mean *you*—Marinog!"

It roused the half-breed to frenzy. He dashed at the girl, struck her in the breast with his arm.

Instantly there was confusion. A dozen swimming figures cut off my view. Out of the meelee the Marinog came diving. I saw him escape in the crowd.

The King was trying to cover up the incident by going on with his speech. But they would not listen to him. From everywhere came shouts.

"Down with the Marinogs!"

"Half-breeds! Tainted blood of the Maagogs!"

The King's speech had precipitated the very thing he had been trying to avoid! In a sudden fervor of patriotism against the Maagogs, the people were openly taunting all of Maagog blood among them.

There were many half-breeds in the crowd —lurking in secluded spots, eying the King with their huge, solemn eyes. They began slinking away; and most of the crowd let them go. Except the Marinoid girls. Perversely feminine, the girls swam around them—taunting, laughing, jeering.

THE King looked down anxiously at Atar and me. Then, with sudden dominance, his roaring voice stilled the confusion.

"Silence all! Your King speaks! Are you Maagogs that you defy the majesty of your King? You are unjust to the half-breeds. The half-breeds are loyal. Their Maagog blood is forgotten. Tainted they were by heritage—but their taint is washed clean by our Marinoid Waters. They are your brothers! You must love them! They are loyal to me! I trust them!"

"Loyal!" the King repeated. "And when the war is over and we have defeated our foul enemies from the Water of Wild Things—the loyal half-breeds will be honored among us!"

A crowd is easily swayed for the moment. Soon they were cheering the half-breeds—exhorting them to remain loyal. The girl whose taunting words had started the trouble was swimming toward us across the open cube of water. Some instinct at that moment caused me to glance overhead. A figure was clinging to the foliage directly above the King—a half-breed man. I saw his arms fling something downward. Something long and thin, and gleaming green-white in the glare of lights. It looked like a spear. But it came down more slowly.

And then I saw it was swimming! A needle-fish the length of a man, with a nose two feet long, pointed and stiff as a rapier! With increasing speed it was swimming downward directly at the King!

A second or two of confused thought too rapid for action. The needle-fish was darting downward faster now than a thrown spear. The King was unaware of it. The fish's rapier nose would run him through from back to chest!

I found myself gripping the King's legs, trying to pull him down. But another figure from near at hand dove at him. The Marinoid girl who had taunted the half-breed! Her arms went around the King's neck. . . .

A flash of silver as the needle-fish came at them. . . . A choking female cry. . . . The girl's body sank to the roof-top at the feet of the startled King. On her face, inert, she lay with the fish like a sword-blade buried in her back!

The King was unhurt. He was shouting commands at the excited crowd. Overhead there was a scuffle—a scream of anguish; the half-breed's body—he who had launched the needle-fish—came slowly down to us. . . . I saw a dozen spears from the enraged crowd sticking in it.

We lifted up the girl—grotesque to my mind with her four arms—but by Marinoid standards one of their greatest beauties. She was still alive. Thoughtlessly, I pulled the fish from her wound, broke its sword-blade nose across my knee—snapped its slim body as one would snap a length of string.

A thoughtless act! From the wound the girl's blood gushed. It spread like smoke in air; the water all around us was pink.

Atar had his arms about the girl. Then he got to his feet; and with a command to the crowd to disperse, he swam away to fetch the man of medicine.

The King and I knelt by the girl. Atar would be too late; she was dying.

"Child," said the King gently, "soon you will be healed and strong again. And never shall I forget what you did for me today." But she shook her head weakly; her lips, twisted with pain, were trying to smile at him. Her words were low, halting; the King and I bent lower to hear them.

"Loyal—subjects! *I* was loyal. Didn't—mean to start—any trouble. You—forgive me?"

"Yes," said the King. "Don't talk now, child."

"Loyal," she repeated. "Everyone should be—loyal to his King. I'm—glad I could show— To die for—"

The blood gushing from her mouth stopped the words; but her eyes were still smiling—smiling as they glazed and the light faded from them.

CHAPTER XXV

"NONA," I said, "do you wish to go to this merry-making? . . . Caan, should I take her?"

It was two days after the attempted assassination of the King. I had not yet seen the cavern where the King was preparing for war. I was going there after this next time of sleep.

We in Rax—the King, Atar, Caan and I—were much perturbed at the turn affairs were taking. We knew now that Og's emissaries were among us. But they kept themselves hidden—talking secretly to the half-breeds, to all who sympathized with the Maagogs.

We knew all this; but we could do nothing about it. There was no police force, or army, or anything of the kind in this crude Marinoid civilization. Soon the King would organize an army—we were planning to do that almost at once—as soon as the final preparations in the cavern were complete. And meanwhile the King wished to do nothing that might precipitate further trouble with the half-breeds. An internal revolt, on the eve of foreign warfare—that was what we most dreaded.

It was at this juncture that some of the King's councillors suggested a public celebration, such as was always held at the birth of a child to the royal family, or on other festive national occasions.

A celebration! When we were at the brink of war! To me, it was a mistake. It could do nothing but humiliate—antagonize—the half-breeds. They could not take open part in it; the Marinoids would not permit that. Yet, said the King, we had our own people to think of. There is a certain human quality of mind which turns to merry-making on the eve of danger. You on Earth have seen that in your own history. The Marinoid morale would be helped. To laugh, sing, shout, and make love—and then go to battle. That was what the people wished; and against my advice, the celebration was to be held.

Now, in Caan's house—where Boy was asleep with Caan's children—we were planning to go to the cube of water before the palace where the festival was to be held.

"Take me," cried Nona. "I want to go with you, my Nemo."

Never had my Nona seen public merry-making; the woman in her was very eager to go, to take part in it.

And I took her. With Caan, we started after that next meal; and Caan's woman stayed at home with Boy and her own children.

My last moment decision to take Nona seemed somewhat superfluous, for all that day she had been getting ready to go! Clothes! My Nona was as interested in

them as any woman of your own Earth.

She had made every preparation, and soon she swam before us, laughing with excitement and delight. I gasped. For the first time, I saw her usually up-flowing hair bound down to her shapely head, coiled and braided, and with a garland of tiny marine flowers in it. A new, close-fitting suit, with a girdle. And anklets of dull green, which by contrast made her smooth skin shine like polished pink marble.

"You like me, my Nemo?" she laughed. And she eyed me sidewise through lowered lashes—as though I were not her mate, but only one who wished to be.

THEN we started. The streets—more brightly lighted than usual—were bedecked with flowers. The light slanting down through the water from overhead lent queer grotesque shadows to the figures swimming beneath them. The crowd was all moving toward the palace. Marinoid men and girls—gaudily dressed; the girls, I noticed, all more scantily robed than upon less festive occasions. In couples and little groups, they swam along. The water rang with the gay voices of the girls. A cart passed us—a sleigh driven by a swimming animal—the equipage of one of the King's advisers. But its owner was not in it now. It was loaded with Marinoid girls; as they swept past, one of them leaned out and tossed a garland of seaweed over my head, laughing at me provocatively.

We three — Caan, Nona and I — swam slowly onward. The eve of warfare! No one would have believed it who swam the gay streets of Rax that night! And yet—a figure lurked here and there. The Marinog half-breeds! From doorways of houses dark, with the shades all closed, from roof-tops, tangles of street vegetation, they hovered, motionless. Or swam furtively, close along the walls of cross-streets.

I could feel their eyes upon me. At one corner we passed a giant half-breed man. He stood on the street-bottom, motionless, and he did not move to make way for us. I passed quite close to him; and I could sense that his figure stiffened, tensed. I looked back. . . . He was staring after me, grim, inscrutable, sinister. . . .

The palace, and the water before it, were jammed. Glaring green water. Lights everywhere. Crowds of gaudy figures. . . . Laughing girls, alert to their sex. . . . Confusion . . . gayety everywhere. . . .

I followed Caan, keeping Nona close beside me. On the palace roof we came to rest, near a sort of throne erected at the parapet—a throne on which the King and Queen were sitting.

Atar joined us. "Will you eat now? Food is there waiting."

He smiled at my Nona, kneeling before her. And she bent down and touched his head with her cheek, Marinoid fashion.

We did not care to eat; across the palace roof I could see servants of the King handing out food to all who approached.

At the edge of the parapet, with the King and Queen above us, and Atar gallantly at Nona's side, we sat down to watch.

There was music in the water! I looked about for its source. At first I did not know what it was; how should I—since I had never heard music before? It came from a platform that dangled from the foliage overhead. On the platform were a dozen Marinoid men. Three or four plucked at thin, vibrating lengths of fish-bone, which gave off curiously twanging, but not unmusical notes. The rest pounded shells of different sizes—thumped them with resilient little hammers in odd rhythm.

AN ORCHESTRA! Perhaps you could call it that. They played it with enthusiasm, and almost continuously. On the platform also were three Marinoid girls. One of them, waving a long, filmy robe about her, was twisting her body in the music's rhythm; when she tired, the other girls took her place. And their voices, singing, joined the music.

Nona and I watched, breathless, confused, but like children at your circus, eager to see everything which simultaneously was going on.

Presently, several young men swam to different parts of the arena, and clung to the foliage. A young girl—one of the Marinoid beauties—swam to the center of the open water. She hung poised; and as the music suddenly stopped, she unbound her coiled hair and dropped the garland of seaweed which had been adorning it. The garland drifted downward. The girl uttered a sudden sharp command. At the signal, the young men dove for the prize. A sharp scuffle. . . . Then one, quicker, more fortunate than the rest, secured the garland and amid applause from the onlookers, swam up and restored it to the girl. Her embrace thanked him. With

tenderly lingering fingers he bound up her tresses and adorned them with the garland; and together they swam off to the roof-top to eat, or to sit down and watch the performance repeated by others.

In another section of the water, the couples thus chosen were dancing. I can call it nothing else — swimming in close embrace in time to the music.

And there were other games, the details of which I could not grasp. Combats between young men — bloodless, but real enough for all that—with the maiden's favor always as the prize. Nona and I sat enthralled. I was disappointed in my Nona. She wanted to join in the games! But I would not let her, of course.

We were getting hungry. I turned to find that Atar was no longer with us. On the throne behind us the King was adorning a Marinoid girl just chosen as the most beautiful. But where was Atar?

A group of girls and a gay young man came swimming up and importuned the King. He listened to them, and then signed for Nona and me to approach.

"Nemo," he said. "They wish your Nona for the swimming and diving exhibitions."

I did not know what he meant at once; but Nona seemed to understand.

"Nemo! Let me do it! Please!" Her eagerness was child-like.

And then abruptly Atar dashed up. He whispered to the King. Then he turned to me.

"Nemo, come!"

Nona was still begging me.

"Let her do it," said Atar. "We will be back shortly."

"You will stay near her?" I said to Caan. I could not leave Nona again uncared for.

Caan nodded; and Atar pulled me away.

We swam from the gay, noisy scene—up a dim cross-street which was silent and deserted. Atar had not spoken.

"What is it?" I demanded.

"THE half-breeds!" He increased his pace. Soon we were at the roof of the city; open water stretched above us. From the cross-streets at the side of the city, figures were issuing—the figures of men, women and children. They came out into the open water furtively, and mounted at once. Little groups, mounting upward to gather in a crowd above the city. And then streaming off in a line single-file—a swimming line of figures which already extended out of sight into the dimness of the distant water.

The half-breeds—Marinogs—all the Maagog sympathizers—were leaving Rax! Rats leaving a sinking ship? Was it that? Or a gathering for action somewhere else? The Water of Wild Things lay in that direction. Were they going there? Or to Gahna—sister city to Rax? Gahna also lay that way.

We watched for a time, and then Atar led me back to the festival. I need not repeat our speculations. Our questions soon were to be answered.

We reached the roof-top. The swimming and diving exhibitions were in progress—Marinoid girls of beauty and grace, diving from the overhead foliage down across the brilliantly lighted cube of water.

I saw hoops of woven weed being held in front of the palace—a dozen of them at intervals. And Nona was just then poised, ready for her dive. I held my breath staring up to where her slim, pink-white figure stood gracefully on the wavering end of a huge, fan-like leaf high above me. A signal, shouted by the King. Down Nona came in a head-first dive. She hardly made a ripple as she passed through the water. Through one of the hoops she passed, then swimming zig-zag through other hoops, up and down, slowly turning over to pass a hoop feet first, then doubled up, spinning like a ball, and at last straightening out again, swimming up and finishing on tiptoe before the King, graceful as a swallow alighting.

My beautiful Nona! Even the Marinoids —strange as her mermaid beauty was to them—applauded her loudly. And the King smilingly touched her radiant cheek with his. My own cheeks burned with the pleasure of it, my pride in this girl of mine. Presently she was back at my side, and I was holding her close, while still they applauded.

Then other girls dove. Then we ate. And I, with Nona only, swam in time to the music. Gayety. The pleasure of the senses. And then like a thunder-clap came a woman's shrill cry of horror. The music was stilled; silence, strange, uncanny, after all that laughter, fell over the water. A little knot of people were approaching the King. I hurried there, found a Marinoid girl of Gahna—a girl with frail body torn and bleeding.

We laid her down; and to the King she gasped out her news. The half-breeds had

risen into revolt. From Rax and all the other Marinoid cities, they had gone to Gahna. The city was in terror. Bloodshed. And the Marinoid girls who resisted the half-breeds were being killed!

The half-breed revolt! It had come!

CHAPTER XXVI

ONCE before, I had been to Gahna. It lay to one side, but fairly close to the entrance to the Water of Wild Things. Like Rax, it was built of marine vegetation—a narrow cylinder standing on end. There was a slight current to the water here. The city sustained upright by its airpods overhead—nevertheless leaned to one side under pressure of the current. From a distance, it looked like your leaning tower of Pisa.

It was a beautiful city — less densely populated and more beautiful than Rax. Its exterior surfaces—its sides and top—were laid out in parks and gardens. Large houses, many-balconied, with ferns and flowers. And the entire top one broad public garden.

In the King's sleigh we went there now. The water between the two cities was deserted. We passed straggling figures coming from Gahna — broken, bleeding figures — Marinoid refugees escaping for their lives. They came on, swimming slowly, painfully. We passed a girl, floundering, then sinking inert.

Ahead lay the dim distance. The water was pale green with its glowing, inherent light. Then it began tinting red. Atar gripped me, trembling with the horror of what we knew lay ahead; and the King urged his dolphin faster.

Then, Gahna! The outlines of the city loomed before us. A ring of hovering predatory figures surrounded it! We could see other figures launching themselves out from the streets, desperately; and the waiting figures surging upon them.

We halted our dolphin; and presently, still at a distance, we mounted over the city, to gaze down into its garden roof. A crowd of mermaids were huddled there—huddled in groups, trying to hide in the clumps of ferns.

But the half-breeds sought them out. Swords flashed silver, then red. Faint screams of agony floated up to us.

Slowly we passed over the city. A Marinoid girl clung to an air-pod. Three men, dead-white of flesh, saw her there. They dove at her . . . their arms entwined her, tore at her robe. Two of the men swam aside, laughing. The other persisted; and at the girl's resistance he suddenly drew a dagger and plunged it into her breast, furious because his comrades were laughing at him.

There was a balconied, terraced home. Through the red haze that now stained the water everywhere, we saw a man and woman and little child huddled in a corner of the roof. From a roof-doorway to the house below, a group of half-breed men appeared. They rushed at the Marinoid man . . . a scuffle and the man lay dead. Two of the assailants dragged the woman away . . . she was fighting them, screaming with terror, and they cuffed her face to subdue her. . . . Two half-breeds were left with the child. One drew his sword, but the other held him back, producing from his robe a struggling white thing—a needle-fish. Then they tossed the child upward into the water, launched the fish at it. Through the child's soft body, the fish bore its way.

And everywhere it was the same. We swung upward, beyond sound of the screams. But the red in the water followed us. Figures were plunging from the city at every point; but few escaped the waiting ring of half-breeds. The water darkened with the blood that was added to it.

Slowly, sick at heart, we retraced our way to Rax. And then the crowning blow. Our guards at the entrance to the Water of Wild Things had been set upon and defeated. A few had escaped to bring the news. Og's Maagog army was advancing through the coral! With our preparations still incomplete, the Maagogs were striking!

The war had begun!

THE Maagogs were striking. The war had begun!

I do not like to remember in detail the scene around the King's palace which followed this sinister news. The city, so gay, so carefree a few hours before, was a turmoil of confusion, of terror—almost of panic.

To the palace the people crowded. The cube of water was jammed with a frightened, expectant throng — a throng that looked to its ruler for protection — for advice, for commands.

This throng before the palace clamoured

for the King to tell them what to do. With my Nona and Boy beside me I was inside the building—in a room with the King and Queen, Atar and Caan.

I shall never forget that scene. To make you appreciate it, I shall have to remind you that never before in the reign of this King had an enemy menaced his domains. And this Marinoid civilization—as I now realize it to have been—was very primitive.

In a word, our King at this crisis was flurried. His preparations for war were in truth but vague and impractical. The Marinoids did not know the meaning of an army. Maagogs were coming to kill them; Marinoids must fight in defense.

That was the extent of the King's plans. He sat in his carved shell on the throne-platform, and we others crowded around him anxiously. Outside the palace, the shouts of the frightened mob floated in to us through the water.

"The Maagogs!" said Atar. "They are coming through the coral barrier! Our guards there have been defeated—killed most of them—and the rest have fled."

"Coming here?" I asked. "Will they come here to Rax, do you think?"

The King looked at us hopelessly. "Here—to Rax? They cannot. I am not ready. We must arm to repulse them. They must not come so soon."

"Before this Time of Sleep is over they will be here," Caan declared gloomily.

Two of the King's Councillors appeared swimming into the room—old men, terrified nearly out of their wits. They huddled down beside us; and one of them said:

"At the Cavern, my King, they are waiting your orders."

The shouts outside grew louder, more insistent.

"The King!"

"Where is the King?"

"Let him speak to us—tell us what to do!"

"We are ready to fight! Death to the Maagogs! Our King! We want our King!"

"Father!" cried Atar. "Speak to them! Command them! Now, or panic will come and we are lost."

The King rose to his feet uncertainly. "Yes, speak to them—of course I will."

A woman swam hurriedly into the apartment—a serving woman to the Queen. "My King, the people are arriving from the forests and the mudbanks. They are crowding into Rax—they do not know where to go or what to do."

The rural population! Coming into the city for protection.

"I will speak to them," the King repeated—he said it numbly, as in a daze. "I must tell them something. . . . Atar, my son, we must plan something, you and I. But there is no time—the Maagogs are coming so soon."

It was then that my Nona whispered to me. Vehemently, with her soft arms entwined about my neck. Inspiring words! My blood raced hot through my veins.

"I?"

"You!" she insisted. "You, Nemo!"

Where was I born? I do not know. But I must have come from some great civilization. Latent within me were powers I little realized; and in that instant of crisis, with the inspiration of Nona's words, the blood of my ancestors dominated me.

I flung myself up into the water and waved my arms at the astonished King.

"A leader!" I cried. "We Marinoids need a man who will lead us to victory. It is I—Nemo—who will command! Og is coming. *I* will oppose him. I—the Stranger—with my woman Nona!"

I caught Atar's excited gaze; I added: "With you, Atar, to help me, we will win!" The King was more confused than ever, but I saw that he was pleased—relieved. And my Nona's eyes were upon me. Pride, joy and love for me was in them.

"Come," I said to the King. "I will talk to the people, with you beside me. And you will tell them that Nemo—the Stranger within their gates—is in command!"

WE WENT to a little balcony outside the throne-room window. The crowd fell silent when it saw us. At the railing we stood beside each other, with Nona, Atar and the rest crowding the doorway behind us.

The King, with the responsibility of leadership removed from him so unexpectedly, had recovered his poise. He put one of his arms about my shoulder as smilingly he showed me to the people. It was a throng so dense that all I could see was a mass of faces and bodies. Silence, then a wavering cheer.

The King extended his other arms; and he told the hushed people that I was to be their leader. They cheered; but there was

an ominous undercurrent of murmuring that went with it.

I was thinking swiftly—planning what I would say—what I should tell them to do. And I must admit that in that first moment, I was confused myself. But no one should see it. I knew that most of all I must appear confident; and talk to them inspiringly—perhaps bombastically.

"My beloved people; the great God of the Marinoids sent me to you," I began. "To lead you against this traitor Og. Glorious times are ahead of us, my people. Victory—"

But the murmur of dissent was growing! A voice shouted a raucous jibe.

"Wait! Listen to me, all of you. This Og, whom once I fought before you all—" It was an unfortunate allusion; I had lost that combat with Og. "Silence!" I shouted over the noise. "Into the Water of Wild Things I have just been—and from this self-same Og recovered my woman Nona."

But the mingled cheers and jibes halted me. I could feel that the King's arm around me was trembling.

He whispered to me quaveringly: "Go on, Nemo. Tell them—"

But my Nona suddenly sprang forward, up to the parapet.

"Women of the Marinoids—" Her voice to the women of the crowd rang out clear and silenced the confusion.

"Women of the Marinoids! This is war! We women—our children—our homes, are threatened! Do we fight, or do we sit by while our men defend us? Women of the Marinoids—answer me!"

They did answer her. Their shouts of applause came up—enthusiastic shouts of the women in which the cheering voices of the men were mingled.

And over it all came Nona's cry: "I knew you would say that!"

My wonderful Nona! She was dominating them. Her glorious arms—smooth as pink marble—went out to them appealingly.

"We are but women, frail of body. But the spirit of battle is strong within us."

Then she called upon all the women who were young and strong like herself—bade them come now to the palace roof-top.

"Come!" she cried. "Let us show our men what sort of women are theirs. Come now, and Nona—the Stranger's woman—will command you in the battle!"

They came. From out of the crowd they swam upward—the fairest, most beautiful of the Marinoid girls—and settled upon the palace roof. Two hundred of them perhaps. It was inspiring. It could not help but be—and my Nona knew it and had planned it thus. The men, seeing them gather, cheered loudly and called upon me to lead them to protect their women.

It saved the situation for the King and me. Nona swam upward.

"My man Nemo will command you men," she shouted. "And I will lead the women."

She gazed down at me. "We women will wait for your orders, my Nemo."

And among the girls she took her place—waiting.

I had made my decisions. The crowd now was with me. In a breath, I knew, the news of my leadership would spread through the city.

I spoke. I knew that my voice now carried the real confidence of authority; and the crowd knew it. I commanded that all the older women, old men and children should go to their homes, bar their doors and windows, and wait. All men, able-bodied, I ordered to the roof of the city, there to wait for their arms and equipment which very soon would be furnished them. They were to divide themselves into two groups; older men whose power of giving the electric shock was waning; and those younger in whom it was still at its height.

As I began giving orders, the things I must do multiplied in my mind. A score of the fastest swimmers in the city I bade come to me at once in the throne-room of the palace. I wished to send them to the entrance of the Water of Wild Things to bring us news of the enemy's advance; to send them throughout the forests and the mudbanks—to order everyone living there to come into Rax.

There were three other Marinoid cities besides Rax and Gahna—small, unimportant cities. My couriers would order them to prepare as Rax was preparing—and send their fighting men at once to the roof of Rax.

Other things I thought of. Gahna, we must abandon. Its Marinoid population was massacred; the half-breeds held it in full possession. I did not mention this now to the crowd. But I told them that every half-breed encountered in Rax was to be killed.

"The refugees coming here from the mud-

banks," Atar whispered, to remind me.

All refugees into Rax I ordered to divide into two groups, the fighting men to come to the roof of the city; the others, women, old men and children, to seek quarters in the homes of Rax. Any household would take them in. . . .

The people were dispersing, following my orders. Nona, with her girls, was waiting on the palace roof. I signed her to swim down to me.

"Select a girl to command them, under you," I said swiftly. "And my Nona, you were wonderful."

Her caress answered me.

"Give Boy to Caan's woman, Nona—to take home. Kiss him for me—our Boy."

Even in the haste of that moment, I remember how thankful I was that Boy was too young to fight. Yet Nona wished to fight, you exclaim! True — but can you guess how cold my heart was within me at the thought of it?

"Then, Nona, join me in the throne-room. We must go to the Cavern."

I dispatched my couriers. And those I sent to spy upon the enemy carried with them my unspoken prayer that they would bring back word we had at least a few hours to prepare. A few hours! This Marinoid was a very little nation, as *you* would reckon it. Yet warfare cannot be planned upon such short notice.

CHAPTER XXVII

MY DUTIES at the palace for the moment were over. With Atar, Caan and Nona, I hurried to the Cavern. Atar led us—none of us others had ever been there.

It was not far from Rax—a broad entrance cunningly disguised with removable foliage. A tunnel, short and steeply downward, led us under the sea-bottom. It was dark. Lights at intervals illumined the water—dim, wavering lights, lending to everything a ghostly unreality.

Several times we were stopped; but at sight of Atar the guards let us pass. Ahead of us presently we could see more open water—a broad shallow amphitheatre, artificially lighted. Figures were moving about in it, busy at various tasks. Human figures—most of them, but not all. Some were dolphins. And then I saw a great cage within which two or three hundred of the graceful creatures were swimming idly about.

With Atar to show us the way, we swam slowly the length and breadth of the cavern. Here, he said, were the weapons being made. I looked them over. A thousand of them possibly. Small, dagger-like things; swords; others long as a lance; still others very thin, but heavy in front to be thrown through the water like javelins.

The sight of the weapons standing in racks inspired me. With them, I could equip a thousand fighting men. More perhaps.

Further along we came upon a side cave. In it I saw a dozen sleighs to be drawn through the water by dolphins. They were not unlike the King's sleigh in which I had already ridden upon two memorable occasions, save that these were smaller—to carry one man only. And slimmer, with streamlines, so that they might offer a minimum of resistance in passing through the water.

I examined them more closely. Each had along its sides, banks of lights—small, torpedo-shaped pods filled with extraordinarily luminous organisms. The lights were shrouded; but Atar uncovered those of one sleigh. A blinding glare, pointing only forward, shot like a search-light beam through the water.

These "light-sleighs," Atar explained, were designed to precede an advancing army. They would blind the enemy, throw him into clear light. And in the comparative darkness behind them, our Marinoid forces could advance.

We passed along—quickly, for we had little time for these explanations. Atar was giving orders; the workmen were preparing everything for immediate action.

There were other sleighs—"sleighs of darkness." These were in shape like the others—but larger, for two men. Around them were ink-bags. I remembered the squid which had attacked us in the Water of Wild Things. These bags, when squeezed, emitted an inky fluid—a screen of darkness that could be thrown over the scene of battle at any critical moment of disaster or retreat.

I was enumerating in my mind the forces at my command. I had men famed for their power of giving the electric shock. I would use them in a separate division—to combat the black fishes of the Maagogs.

The black fishes! My heart sank as I thought of them. Fearless! Suicidal little brutes whose only instinct was to fight until death. How many of them would Og have to hurl against us?

But we had dolphins. I demanded of

Atar what the dolphins were for. There were several hundred of them, and a score or so were all that could be needed to draw the sleighs.

"Our men will ride them," said Atar. "Small, slim, very skillful men will have to be chosen. Men without the electric power. It would be useless on a dolphin. We can arm these men with the long, thin spears. They can go swiftly, anywhere."

Such words on the very eve of battle! How would we have time to select such men, train them? And where were the men? There were no small, slim, skillful men except among the younger group whose electric power would be more valuable to us.

Again had I reckoned without Nona. Her eyes were shining, her beautiful face flushed with excitement.

"We women will ride your dolphins. Small, slim, skillful—without the electric power—we are the ones you need."

It was then I protested. Indeed, I tried my best to get her to stay with Boy, at home. I failed. And now I realize that in spite of my fears for her, I was more proud of her then than I had ever been before. My Nona!

A SINGLE dolphin out of its cage, swam past us—sleek, graceful creature longer than my body, its every line denoting speed. Atar called to it. Like a dog it came and fawned upon us. With her arm about its neck, Nona caressed it.

"This one will I ride," she exclaimed. "Let me try now. Atar, make him let me try."

Atar summoned a young Marinoid—one who had helped train the dolphins. He showed Nona how to mount it. She had on an outer garment at the moment, and at the lad's direction she discarded it.

Then he brought thongs of grass, and bound her hair tightly around her head.

She was ready. Lying flat on the dolphin's back, her slender body seemed welded to it. A collar was about the dolphin's head; and into it she thrust an arm to hold herself. The young Marinoid told her how the creature was guided. A kick of the heel, pressure of an arm against its head—or even a whispering word.

She was away! Back and forth through the water before us the dolphin sped; and Nona's body flat against it caused hardly a ripple. Then they gave her one of the long, lance-like spears. She carried it; held it poised; flashed it above her, below—lunging at imaginary enemies, as the dolphin darted out under her commands.

The grace and skill of it! I was amazed. Woman, with such a thing, learns faster than man. Soon she was twisting her body down to use the dolphin as a shield, lunging with the lance over its back.

Then she dashed over to where we were waiting, and slipped to the cave floor, standing there panting and triumphant—a little jockey, flushed with victory.

"You see, my Nemo? We women can do it! We will ride your dolphins!"

An hour or more had gone by. For another, we talked and planned, Atar, Caan and I. Nona had taken the dolphins with their four trainers—taken them to the palace roof to organize the girls. Soon our messengers would return from the Water of Wild Things with the news of the enemy's progress.

I went up to the palace to join Nona. The men from the cavern under Caan's direction were on the roof of the city, distributing weapons to our forces gathered there. I had no sooner reached the palace than one of my couriers came in.

Good news! Good news indeed! The Maagog forces were not coming at once to Rax. Gahna was in the hands of their half-breed allies. It was closer to them than Rax. They were heading for Gahna, occupying it—massing there; and from there, doubtless, would presently attack us.

It was the breathing space we wanted—needed so badly. Now we could organize.

Nona with her dolphin was with me as the courier poured out his news. Quick-witted, fertile-minded woman! Never will I cease to marvel at her. She whispered to me a plan—daring—yet almost certain of success. A plan that she and I alone could execute. A plan. . . . But presently you shall hear it in detail, for we lost no time in attempting it.

NONA and I started, each on a dolphin, and each bearing a short, broad-bladed sword. Only Atar knew where we were going, or what we were about to try and do.

Riding the dolphins, we started slowly at first, for I was inexperienced. The creature's sleek body was beneath me and I clung to it, stretching myself out along its back, my fingers gripping its woven-grass collar. Nona rode ahead on a dolphin

slightly smaller, but, I soon was to learn, equally as fast as my own.

"Nemo, are you all right?" Her sober, earnest little face was turned back toward me.

"All right," I said. "Yes, of course."

Would you let a woman know when you were perturbed? Not I.

At once Nona increased the pace, and my own mount followed hers. We were leaving the city, passing out along one of its horizontal streets. It was nearly deserted. The fighters had gone to the city roof; the others were barred in their darkened houses. Occasionally a face would show at a window. A courier came along—returning from one of the other cities. We stopped him. My orders were being obeyed, he reported; the fighters from the other cities were swimming in to join our own men on the roof of Rax.

I sent the courier on to the palace to receive further orders from Atar. We wished to spread the news that the enemy was not attacking at once. And while Nona and I were away on this enterprise, Atar and Caan were to organize the army; and the girl whom Nona had appointed, was to drill the other girls in riding the dolphins.

We passed on, out of Rax. As we left the city—heading for our first objective, the entrance to the Water of Wild Things—I caught a glimpse of the roof of Rax. The open spaces up there were thronged with our men.

Nona increased our pace and very soon Rax with its activities was left out of sight in the dimness behind us. The open water was almost deserted. Refugees were straggling in; occasionally we came upon parties of them—families who had fled from their isolated homes. They all halted and gazed after us curiously as we dashed past them.

"All right, Nemo?"

"Yes. Of course."

We went faster. The water pressed against me, roared in my ears, blurred my vision. I clung tighter, and bent my head in the crook of my arm.

Then, after a time that seemed ages but was doubtless very brief, we slackened. Nona signalled to me, and I rode my dolphin close alongside of hers.

"See," she whispered. "We are here."

Ahead of us in the dim water, moving lights showed. We were almost at the entrance to the Water of Wild Things. The last of the Maagog forces were coming through. We did not dare go close enough to see much. Moving lights disclosed double lines of swimming figures. They were coming out through the passageway they had cut in the coral, and swimming off toward Gahna. The line of their lights extended out of sight in that direction.

We were just in time to see the last of them come through. Og and his black fishes! We assumed it was Og; we had gone closer, but not close enough to distinguish features. A lone male figure carrying a light and surrounded by that swarming pack.

The figure closed the passageway gate at this end carefully. Like ourselves, Og wanted no unruly monsters to get through into Marinoid waters.

We waited until his single light was well on its way to Gahna.

"We can follow now," I said. "Nona—we will succeed. We can do it, my girl—and it is you who have planned it."

She did not answer me; she had already started her dolphin. Like shadows in the gloom, silently, without a ripple of the water as we slipped through it, we followed close after the Maagog invading army.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TO GAHNA. It took us a long while to get there, for the Maagog army advanced slowly. Following the lights we found ourselves descending at once to the sea-bottom. These Maagogs, lumbering and ungainly, were poor swimmers; the line of them was walking along the bottom.

It made my heart leap to realize that. What match would they be for us Marinoids in battle—our men so active in the water—our alert girls on the dolphins. We would cut them to pieces . . . would rout . . .

I whispered my thoughts to Nona.

"Be not too sure, my Nemo," she said soberly. "It may be so but first we must do what we are now planning."

We went on, through the forest road where the Maagogs had tramped aside the tall, tenuous growth of foliage. It was much dimmer in here. Beside us the trees and ferns spread as a dark lacework of green and brown. They met overhead, wavering, tenuous, but impenetrable to our sight.

What a spot for ambush! A thousand hiding-places all about us. An army could lurk here in ambush unseen.

It is very easy to look backwards upon life and say what should have been done. We Marinoids—how stupidly we had done things! Our army—if it had been organized and ready—could have lurked here in this dark forest . . . leaped upon the Maagogs . . . defeated them at once in one great surprise attack . . .

"What?" I whispered.

Nona, from her dolphin beside mine, had reached out and gripped my arm. I followed her gaze, caught a glimpse of a figure hovering amid the air-pods overhead and just in advance of us. A man, coming down now toward us, swimming cautiously.

My heart leaped; my grip on my sword tightened. Then I saw it was a Marinoid—one of my own couriers stationed here to watch the enemy pass.

He joined us. "Og," he said, "and his black fishes were last to pass. I would have given my own life to the fishes could I have killed him. But it did not seem possible."

I sent the courier back to Rax and we went on as before. Out of the forest now, across an open stretch, with the lights of the Maagogs still before us.

Then—Gahna. There it stood, leaning sidewise in the press of current. Traveling so slowly, we could feel the sweep of the moving water. A gentle current here; but just beyond Gahna, I knew there was an opening in the side wall of rock which bordered in the Marinoid domain. It was a large opening leading diagonally downward—an opening larger than the city itself—and into it the water rushed swiftly.

"Wait!" whispered Nona.

We halted our mounts, and waited while the last of the occupying Maagogs dispersed themselves about the city. From this distance we could see their lights but hear no sounds. Evidences of the recent half-breed massacre of the Marinoid population, were about us. Broken, inert bodies lying here and there on the sea-bottom; and the smell of blood in the water.

I shuddered to remember it. Gahna, bloody from end to end—a city of death now; and these triumphant Maagogs occupying it, making it a base from which to attack Rax.

At last they were all in. Cautiously, we advanced further. Moving lights on the city's outer surface—a murmur of sounds. Nothing more.

A few moments and we were under the city! In its cellar, let me say. No one lived down here; sand under our feet; woven vegetation twenty feet overhead—a cellar ceiling which formed the lowest tier of the city.

It was black in here; and almost soundless, just the murmur of the city above us. We stood motionless, listening. Were we alone? Dared we light our lights? I knew that if they caught us in here we could not escape. Yet we could see nothing without lights.

We unshrouded them finally—little pods which threw tiny wavering green beams. With them, we poked around, cautiously, with our swiftly beating hearts seeming about to smother us.

GAHNA was a small city. Four thick stalks of vegetation—each about twice the thickness of my body—formed its main stems. I stood beside one of them, dug my sword into it.

Within five minutes, I had hacked through the stem. Nona held the light.

"Quietly," she whispered. "If they should hear us—"

The stalk was severed. A tremor seemed to run over the upper part, and it moved slightly sidewise.

Trembling ourselves, we attacked another. Severed it; then the third.

The city over us was shifting, toppling. The fourth stalk was twisted and bent by the strain. . . . I severed it with a few blows.

"Swim! Nona! Quickly!"

The ceiling overhead was lifting—shifting. Smaller stalks and vines which had taken root in the sand were tearing away. Above us came a cry—shouts—confusion. . . .

We swam to extricate ourselves. Tearing vines seemed to leap at us, but we avoided them.

Back to our dolphins. They were waiting; we mounted them—turned to look at the city. It was turning over in the water, and floating away. Slowly, then faster, down toward that black opening into which the current would sweep it.

The city of death! But every living thing in it was pouring out. Lights—dark blobs of figures—shouts—commands. . . .

The Maagogs were escaping! In a turmoil; and they would lose whatever apparatus they had for war; but they were escaping nevertheless. We had hoped the catastrophe would come more quickly. But it

did not. The city toppled slowly over, while those terrified figures leaped from it. Slowly it floated away—then plunged into the torrent.

It was gone with its murdered Marinoid dead; but on the sand, and in the water ahead of us, the Maagogs and the half-breeds remained. Some had gone to their death, no doubt; the others . . .

"They will not wait to attack us now," Nona whispered suddenly. "We have crippled them, but . . ."

"We must get back," I exclaimed. "It is we who must attack at once—finish them up—now, before they can recover—"

IN RAX, we found Atar with his work well done. We Marinoids were ready. And within an hour or very little more, we set forth to meet the advancing Maagogs.

I led my army out of Rax. The details of its organization I had left to Atar and Caan, while Nona and I were on our expedition to Gahna. They had done their work well; and within an hour after our return we were ready to leave—to face the advancing Maagog forces.

We left from the roof of Rax. The broad, open space there was ample for mobilization, and in the center of it my forces were gathered. *You* of a greater civilization, might call this army of mine meager. Yet to us Marinoids it was huge—the largest group of fighting men these people had ever conceived of organizing.

Some two thousand men, girls and dolphins—the product of all the Marinoid cities and the rural population. We had many more who wanted, and were able, to join us. But these I left at home—some in Rax, some in the other, smaller cities. So that at home—in the event of disaster to our fighters in the open water—we would not be quite defenseless.

An army of two thousand! It was not very much, of course; but it was equipped and organized—with a plan of action which I shall tell you in a moment. That it would be ample for victory, I did not doubt. Og and his Maagogs might outnumber us—of that I could not say. But we had fighting qualities which the slow lumbering Maagogs could not possibly equal. We would be easily victorious, I thought; but Nona was not so sanguine.

In spite of my commands the people of Rax, many of them, had gathered on the city roof to see us leave; a circular fringe of them jammed the edge of the roof, waiting to cheer our departure.

But they did not cheer. With solemn faces they stared upward at our columns as we rose into the water—women staring after their husbands and sons, even their daughters—women and old men staring, and wondering which of their loved ones would return alive to them.

In command of the entire Marinoid forces, I rode alone on a dolphin—with hands free and with only a lance fastened flat against the dolphin's back and a dagger in my belt. I was first off the roof of Rax. As I rose, gliding smoothly upward and outward, I looked down to see the city dropping away.

A column of young men, swimming five abreast, came up next—like birds rising in orderly array to follow their lone leader. It was an inspiring sight—this sinuous curving line of swimmers. It swung into the water, bent like a huge rainbow over the city, straightened, and followed me diagonally upward.

Soon Rax had dwindled small and dim in the water below. But I could see Nona's forces—the girls mounted on dolphins—as they too were starting. Then Rax, now so far beneath me, blurred and was lost in the gray-green haze of water; and I turned my attention ahead.

The backbone of my army was the line of young men swimming five abreast behind me. Five hundred of them there were—young, powerful swimmers—youths at the height of their physical strength. Each was by nature capable of shocking into insensibility with an electric discharge, any opponent he could touch by head and heels simultaneously.

These young men were unarmed; I felt that they could use their natural weapon to better advantage when swimming free-handed.

Nona's corps consisted of some two hundred girls mounted on dolphins. Each with a long, lance-like spear in her hands. Nona commanded them—with ten extra girls, each to control a group of twenty.

Then there was Atar's corps of sleighs—the "light-sleighs" which I have already described. Atar himself had a dolphin mount. In each of the ten dolphin-drawn sleighs was a single occupant—an older man. These sleighs I would use to precede us—to throw light upon the enemy, blind him, and cover our onslaught made from behind.

The "sleighs of darkness"—ten of them, dolphin-drawn, and each with two occupants—were commanded by Caan, himself riding a separate dolphin. These sleighs were for darkening the water in the event of a catastrophe to our fighters—to cover our retreat wherever it might be necessary.

FOR the rest, my main forces were a thousand fighting men—older men in whom the electric power was waning. They were armed with various types of spears—daggers, javelins and lances. They were leaving Rax in a long swimming line some ten abreast.

Such was my army which now was following me into battle. I led it upward. Behind me I could see the long columns of swimming figures—the sleighs in two broad groups—the girls on the dolphins in squads of twenty, each with its leader apart.

Ahead of me lay open water—a gray-green in the half-light, dim and blurred. Far overhead I knew was the rocky ceiling which marked the top of this watery, subterranean world; and the ooze and sand of the sea-bottom was perhaps two thousand feet beneath me.

I was heading for Gahna. The water here was almost free of vegetation, but not wholly so. Occasionally thin, waving spires of seaweed, covered with air-pods to sustain them, reared their heads. I threaded my way among them; and with every turn I made, the line of swimming figures behind me followed.

Soon I conjectured I must be half-way to the former site of Gahna. The Maagogs would probably follow the sea-bottom in their advance, for they were all indifferent swimmers, flabby of muscle and short of breath. It was time for me to descend and locate them.

I waited—as it had been prearranged that I should wait at this point; and as I hung poised in a broad stretch of empty water, my army swung up and gathered. In two huge concentric circles, the men swam slowly around me, while the girls on the dolphins moved lazily back and forth above and below.

A beautiful sight, these girls—slim bodies clinging closely to the sleek backs of their graceful mounts. And Caan and Atar with their squads of sleighs holding motionless on the outskirts.

In the center of it all, Nona rode her dolphin to join me.

"We are all ready, Nemo." And she laughed gaily; though searching her face, I could see no laughter in her solemn eyes.

I told her then to wait while I went down to the sea-bottom to locate the enemy. She nodded; and I left her.

Slowly I drove my dolphin around the circle of my men—shouting a word of encouragement here and there. I consulted a moment with Caan and Atar; waved at Nona as I passed her again, and dove my mount downward.

The ring of waiting figures above me faded into dimness and were lost. I was alone in the water.

It took but a few moments to reach the bottom; it came up to me, by optical illusion tilted vertically on end. A hundred feet above it I righted my mount.

I was over a level floor of sand, with cactus-like growths here and there. Empty; there was no sign of Maagogs.

Ahead of me, in the direction of where Gahna had once stood, I saw the shadows of a forest. I advanced toward it; and from it were emerging the first lines of the oncoming enemy.

BUT my heart sank. There were very many of them.

At once I raced my dolphin upward. And my thoughts were racing also. Again I had lost another opportunity for ambush. Had we reached the forest before the Maagogs began to emerge, we might have surprised them there. The forest was several miles long and a mile broad perhaps, in the horizontal direction from Gahna to Rax. A mile of thick vegetation—tree spires and a tangle of vines and weeds rearing themselves several thousand feet up into the water. The Maagog army was now traversing that mile-width of forest. Perhaps, if I could cut them off in there—attack them piecemeal as they emerged. . . .

I was again with my own forces. Nona, Atar and Caan rode their mounts hastily to meet me, and I told them the situation.

It took us but a moment to decide. We would maintain this upper open water as our base. I ordered Atar with his light-sleighs and half of our electric fighting men, to follow me down. I would attack these first columns of the enemy as they came out of the forest.

Nona, with her girls, was to ride swiftly above the forest, descend on its other side and drive the last of the Maagogs in. We

did not want any of them to retreat toward Gahna.

I waited, while Nona with the dolphins dashed upward and away. The girls had all been flushed and eager; but as they swept by me in a line I saw that each little face was white, set and grave.

They vanished in a swirl of water. I wheeled my dolphin toward Atar. His ten light-sleighs were in a line abreast, with him on his dolphin behind them. He gave a signal. The pods on the sleighs were unshrouded. Green light leaped ahead—a broad, blinding glare; and in the semi-darkness behind it, my electric men were gathered around me.

Then I shouted my command, and we started vertically downward—our first attack upon the enemy.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE GLARE of light showed the water plainly—a brilliant, ghastly green. We reached the sea-bottom, turned and dashed forward. The Maagogs were there. They saw our light coming of course, long before we saw them. A crowd of them, confused, half-blinded, but they were standing their ground nevertheless.

Over the line of light-sleighs I saw that we had to deal here with perhaps five hundred Maagog men. They seemed armed with spears. They huddled heavily against the sea-bottom, some half a mile from the edge of the forest. The line of them stretched back there, and more were constantly coming out.

When our sleighs were no more than a few hundred yards away, I shouted at Atar. At his relayed signal, the sleighs shrouded their pods and turned upward, out of reach of the enemy. It left the water in semidarkness—blackness it must have seemed to the Maagogs, with that blinding glare so suddenly extinguished.

And then we leaped at them.

It was a swirl of confusion, this hand-to-hand warfare. I held my dolphin resolutely above it, taking no part, but watching for every advantage into which I might hurl my men.

Looking down into the swirling water I could see the Maagogs fighting desperately to impale my swimmers with their spears. And my young Marinoids, darting over them, up and down, seeking to touch them head and legs simultaneously that the electric shock might kill them.

The fighting spread. Soon it was going on over a wide area. It was almost silent, uncanny fighting. The swish of the churning water—a shout, a death scream here and there. Bodies were dotting the sand. Maagogs, but Marinoids too. And the Maagogs in this first engagement outnumbered us two to one.

I was perhaps fifty feet above the sand, with the sleighs poised inactive immediately over me. Atar dashed up.

"How are they doing? Nemo, would it be better in the light?"

I had not thought of that. A trio of Maagogs, wounded and confused, came floundering up at us. Atar, from his dolphin, dispatched them easily with his sword.

"The lights!" he shouted. "Lights—and spread out—to light it all."

The lights flashed on; the sleighs moved away to separate positions.

As though on a lighted stage, the scene was now illumined. It was a good move, for the Maagogs, living in the dark Water of Wild Things, could not stand the light as well as we could.

Back to the edge of the forest the fighting was in progress. But my heart sank. There were two Maagogs dead to every Marinoid; but it was not enough. These were the weakest of Og's forces—and I was using against them the best of mine. Half an hour more of such fighting and these first columns would be cut to pieces and routed. But what of that, if I lost nearly half of my finest men? There were the black fishes yet to cope with. My electric men would do best against them.

I saw now my mistake. I should have fought these lumbering Maagogs with my older, more numerous men. Spears against spears—and saved my youth for the black fishes.

Atar, I think, came to these conclusions simultaneously. Together we dashed over the scene of battle, calling off our fighters. They came readily, for the Maagogs, sorely harassed, were glad enough to let them go.

Up we started, but there were now no more than a hundred of us, where before there had been more than twice that. The light-sleighs, again shrouded, followed us. In the dimness down there, the sea-bottom was strewn with inert, broken figures—the wounded floundering—the water darkened with blood. And over toward the forest

the Maagogs were retreating, to join fresh columns coming out. Then as we rose, the scene faded into obscurity.

"We must get back up," Atar called to me. "Get our older men—all of them—and come down again at once."

We were rising to where our waiting army would soon come into view, when off to the left I saw a cloud of tiny forms coming out of the upper recesses of the forest. Dashing at us, to cut off our ascent! Swiftly. I saw at once that our swimmers could not avoid them.

The black fishes! A swarm of them, with Og in their midst, was upon us!

I MUST go back now to when—previous to our first attack—Nona with her girls left us to cross the forest. Nona led them; and swimming at tremendous speed they were soon above the vegetation. It was a queer sight, looking down through the water upon those marine tree-tops. A tangle of weeds; air-pods, some of them gigantic—the whole forest a matted thicket on top of which one could lie at rest.

But there were many places which would have served as entrance down or exit up; which latter thought made my Nona shiver involuntarily. Down in the tangle—two thousand feet down—the Maagogs were passing through. What forces did they have? How many men? How many of the dreaded black fishes? Where were those black fishes—from which point would they attack us?

Nona knew that the fishes could best be fought by our electric men. The little beasts would be easy to shock and kill—but not easy, since they were so small, to impale upon a lance. Nona wondered where they were. If only she could get information of the strength and disposition of the enemy forces—information for me, so that I might intelligently plan my battle.

Woman acts upon impulse. Nona called her girl leaders—directed them to go on and carry out my orders—drive the Maagogs into the forest from its side toward Gahna.

Then abruptly she halted her dolphin; the others swept on, leaving her alone in the silence of the water above the forest. At once she fastened her lance to the dolphin's back and dismounted; and the dolphin, understanding her reiterated, whispered command, held itself poised to await her return.

Nona planned to go down alone—swimming free-handed—into the forest to spy upon the enemy. She wasted no time; finding an open space between the tall spires, she dove into it.

The descent through those tangled, tenuous air-pods and plants, was laborious. She worked her way down, quietly, surreptitiously. It was almost dark, though not quite; and very silent. Far below now, she thought she could hear the sound of voices.

She was perhaps two-thirds the way down, when a sudden movement near at hand caused her heart to leap. Something human! She shrank behind a waving leaf, and clung. Peering into the gloom she saw a human figure—a Maagog. A woman—seemingly unarmed—a small female figure huddling in a branch of vegetation.

A Maagog! Nona could capture her—force from this enemy woman the information she sought.

My Nona plunged forward, her arms outstretched. Plunged silently, swiftly; and she was upon her enemy before the Maagog was fully aware of her. Their bodies met; the Maagog woman (she was no more than a girl) screamed; but Nona's hand went over her mouth.

They fought, tore at each other, with the Maagog girl's four arms gripping my Nona's frail body like the tentacles of an octopus. But Nona was the stronger; her body built of firmer flesh; her muscles more powerful.

ABRUPTLY the Maagog girl yielded. They had been tumbling over and over in the water—wound and entangled with sea-weed; and save for that one scream, fighting silently. Nona pulled her captured antagonist to a tree-stalk, and in one of its branches, held her there firmly. And not until then did she realize that this was Maaret, the girl who loved Og—the girl who had helped us escape from the Water of Wild Things.

"You!"

But Maaret now was crying. "What do you want of me? You go away. I hate you. You tried to take my Og. You let me alone."

Women are strange creatures! My Nona put her arms tenderly about the vehement girl.

"You must not hate me, Maaret. What are you doing here?"

"Og—he is down there. Fighting. For you, he fights—*you,* the woman who stole

his heart. And he may be killed, and I love him."

What could Nona say? This girl had followed Og to battle—followed, hoping to keep him out of danger, because she loved him. And at the last, frightened, she had crawled away to the treetops—crying with fear and misery when Nona set upon her.

"Maaret, listen. You tell me where the black fishes are. Where is your Og?"

"There—in the forest." It was a vague answer—a gesture, not down, but off to one side, toward Rax.

"Still in the forest?"

"Yes. I think so—I don't know. But he was going out to fight."

"The black fishes were with him?"

"Yes."

"How many of them, Maaret?"

But the girl had become suspicious.

"I don't know," she said sullenly.

"He is on the sea-bottom with them? Maaret, listen. How many Maagogs are there in the forest?"

But the girl understood Nona's purpose and set her lips tight.

"Tell me, Maaret."

"No!" burst out the girl. "You would do my Og harm. I want to help him, not you." She tried to pull away, but Nona held her. Nona's anger was rising.

"I'll take you with me," she told the girl. "My Nemo will make you talk."

But Maaret resisted, and suddenly her tears came afresh.

"You let me go. I should be with Og—fighting beside him because I love him. I was a coward to come up here."

The words appealed as none others could to Nona. Her anger vanished; sympathy flooded over her.

"You want to fight for Og, Maaret?"

"Yes! I want to fight—I belong there—beside him. Let me go."

Nona stared into the girl's pathetic little face.

"Go," she said. "You speak truth, Maaret. You belong there with the man you love, no matter for what cause he fights. Go!"

Her gaze followed as Maaret dropped away, down into the recesses of the forest.

IT WAS a terrible moment as we saw those black fishes, with Og in their midst, dashing at us. Atar and I shouted to our men—shouted encouragement. We could not avoid this new enemy; and so we had to plunge at it with a will. A hundred electric men, no more, and all of them were exhausted by the combat they had left but a moment before.

Our light-sleighs were of little use here; hastily we sent them speeding upward, to bring down our main army to our assistance. Atar and I on our dolphins circled about. The black fishes were everywhere; confusion again; the lashing figures of our young men as they met the black, ugly little things—all jaws, and teeth like needles.

A hundred personal battles simultaneously. But there were ten fishes to each of our men at least. The fishes were shocked and killed—some of them. Others bit and tore at our fighters' flesh.

Have you ever seen a school of hungry fish pluck at a bit of food? Dismember it—carry it away? This was like it. . . .

Shuddering, I dashed my dolphin to and fro. A few of the fishes I caught on my lance. But so very few among that thousand. . . .

This was disaster. We would kill half the fishes perhaps—but lose all this portion of our men. Disaster. . . .

I became aware of Atar's dolphin rushing past me; his voice shouting:

"Og! Let us get Og! Force him to call off the fishes! Or kill him!"

Og had been holding himself poised in midwater, watching the scene. But already he had realized the danger. He was making away; and at his call a hundred or more of his fishes gathered around him.

We would have dashed at them; our two dolphins could have scattered them.

But we did not; for from below, a swarm of other figures appeared. Marinogs! The half-breeds! A picked corps of Marinog youths. They were good swimmers. They possessed the power of electric shock. More than a hundred of them were rising now to Og's assistance.

Atar and I stopped our onslaught. Around us on every hand our scattered forces were fighting the fishes. But the little groups of men fighting were now very few; everywhere bodies were sinking inert, with swarms of fishes plucking at them. . . .

We screamed for all to follow us who could; and mounted. A few of our men tried to follow—but not one succeeded. The oncoming Marinogs, fresh and lustful, caught them all.

And with hearts cold within us, Atar and I dashed on upward, alone.

CHAPTER XXX

NONA regained her mount above the forest and continued on to join her girls. I can tell you this part of the battle only as Nona told it to me—briefly, for my Nona talks little of her own deeds.

The girls on the dolphins were beyond the forest, down near the sea-bottom. And they were engaged with the enemy when Nona arrived.

It was the last of the Maagog columns, just entering the forest when the dolphins attacked it. A very brief engagement. A few score of the last, heavy-swimming Maagogs. And without trouble the girls cut them down—drove them into the forest.

Atar and I, rising alone from our defeat, met our main army coming down to help us. The light-sleighs had carried the news.

Hastily we told them of our disaster. It was my fault, no doubt; I should never have split my forces. How easy it is to look back and say what should have been done!

Atar was anxious to descend at once, with all our men, in one desperate attack. But I was learning the art of warfare. Inexperienced still, yet now not wholly so. We must wait here, I told them, for Nona and the girls to return. And by then the enemy would be on this side of the forest. In the open, we would attack them with all our forces at once, as Atar said.

"Look!" shouted Atar.

Above us, in the direction of the forest, the blur of swiftly moving forms showed, with lines of white, V-shaped, behind them.

It was Nona and the girls—victorious in what they had undertaken. The news heartened us. We had lost a few of the girls and dolphins—and two hundred and fifty of our best men. But we had done the enemy all told a more than equal amount of damage.

For half an hour we waited. Atar and I twice cautiously descended. The Maagogs seemed all out of the forest—and were advancing on Rax. High over them in the water, we followed; and almost within sight of Rax, we dove down in a mass upon them.

It was a scene of carnage which at first seemed inextricable confusion. My forces spread out—attacked the enemy everywhere at once. The Maagogs seemed to prefer the sea-bottom; they clung there and fought stubbornly.

At Atar's insistence, I held my dolphin at first in mid-water, out of range of the fighting. Below me was the center of the struggling mass—the main force of sword-armed Maagogs. Against them, in the glare of Atar's light-sleighs, I hurled my older men. They were fighting down there in the brilliant light. We were outnumbered in this section, but I could see that my men were more than holding their own.

Off to the left—toward the forest—a cloud of the black fishes had come up. With them were the Marinog electric men; and against them I sent my own two hundred and fifty youths—and the girls and dolphins.

It was this segment that I most feared. I could see them now; the men were locked in hand-to-hand conflict—lashing the water—hundreds of little groups. The black fishes were mingled with them; and about the whole struggling mass, the girls on the dolphins dashed back and forth.

How long I watched I do not know. I was alone, save that near at hand were Caan and his dark-sleighs, holding themselves in readiness.

A Marinoid fighter came wavering up to me, wounded and gasping.

I descended. The fighters in this central melee had split into two separate sections—and on one side were far outnumbered. Atar was down here; he saw me, and rushed forward.

"NEMO—on this side we lose."

It was impossible to transfer quickly any considerable number of my men from one side to the other.

"Take the lights from the losing side," I shouted; and when Atar had dashed away, I swam my mount up to Caan.

With his dark-sleighs, we swept down into the threatened area. Men were fighting all around us; the dead were everywhere. The ink-bags on the sleighs released their fluid; the water darkened—turning to night.

Back and forth I scurried through the darkness, screaming to my men to shake off their foes—to extricate themselves and rise into the light. In the blackness my dolphin struck many struggling forms—friend and foe alike.

Then I went up, out of the cloud of ink, again into the blessed light. And waited, while in little groups, my sorely pressed fighters struggled up after me.

It was instinct for everyone to escape from that horrible darkness. Have you ever

fought in the dark? It strikes a terror to the soul.

The Maagogs must have felt it, as well as my own men. In the black, inky water, all fighting soon ceased.

And here I saw my opportunity and grasped it. The Maagogs, confused and terror-stricken, were floundering out into the light. They came singly. And their eyes—weaker than those of the Marinoids—could see little when first they emerged.

For many minutes the inky water held together. And around its edges, Atar with his light-sleighs swept their dazzling beams back and forth. There were six or seven hundred Maagogs in there—and as they came out a few at a time, we fell upon them.

It was our great opportunity. And then I realized that I could do the same thing with the other wing. If only I had my other forces here! The girls with the dolphins!

Atar and Caan executed the same maneuver while I dashed away to get Nona. In this third sector things had gone very well indeed. The girls had suffered few casualties. They were fighting the Marinogs—holding them in check, while my electric men dispatched the black fishes.

I searched about for Nona, came upon her in time to see what manner of warfare this was. Three Marinogs had made for her. She went at them full tilt, with lance extended. They scattered; but incredibly swiftly she turned her dolphin, impaled one of them with her lance—then another, while the third for his life, turned and made away.

"Nona!" I called. "Bring your girls! Come—we need you!"

With the girls behind me, I hastened back to Atar and Caan. Out of the inky water below—into the brilliant beams of our light-sleighs—the surprised Maagogs were emerging. The girls rushed at them—the dolphins, extraordinarily swift, seemed to be everywhere at once. . . .

The ink finally cleared away; and my own remaining fighters took a hand. The combat turned to slaughter—then a complete rout. . . .

And I had men free now to send to the other sector, weakened by the withdrawal of the girls. The black fishes and the Marinogs there were overpowered. The fishes fought to the last. A few of the Marinogs fled—back to the Water of Wild Things. And from everywhere about the scene of battle, wounded Maagogs were floundering away.

But we let them go.

We had won.

CHAPTER XXXI

Concluding Statement by Ray Cummings

I FEEL that I should add a few words to this manuscript given me by "Nemo."

This queer old man has been writing for me these memories of his youth. But the Institution officials, with pardonable skepticism, declare to me privately that he is unbalanced—a victim of amnesia since that day he was found wandering on the streets of an American city, with no memory of who he was or where he came from. They tell me he was, in his youth, probably some obscure European astronomer—which would account for his scientific knowledge. Scandinavian perhaps, they now say. His accent is curious, I can hear for myself. But I would not call it Scandinavian; indeed I have heard nothing like it anywhere.

It was not so many weeks ago—dating from the time you read this—when I interviewed the old man, in the neat little reception room of the Institution. I read over this manuscript which he handed me, while he sat staring with eyes that seemed to see far beyond the narrow walls enclosing us.

"But Nemo," I protested, "this is not finished. Is this the last you're going to give me?"

"The last," he said vaguely. "I cannot remember any more. It is getting blurred—fading." He passed a palsied hand across his blue-veined forehead. "Getting blurred—for I am an old man and my faculties are going—very fast."

"But Og," I suggested. "What became of Og?"

He brightened. "Did I not tell you that? I remember now. I met him—near the end of the battle. He had captured one of our dolphins, and a lance. He came at me—and I fought him—I was mounted as he was. . . ."

The tired old voice trailed away.

"Yes?" I prompted.

He started. "What was I saying? Oh yes, about Og. You asked me about Og, didn't you? We might have been knights of the Court of King Arthur—jousting with our lances. I can remember it now—clearly.

I would have run him through almost at the first tilt, but that girl threw herself between us. I did not like to kill her. That was bad. Accident—I could not help it."

"You mean Maaret?"

"Maaret? Yes, that was her name, wasn't it? I remember now. She died in Nona's arms—after I had killed Og. The girl did not know I had killed him. She died—still loving Og, and glad that she had given her life for him. . . I remember that now."

"But Nona and your boy? What of them? And you, Nemo—who are you?"

"I—I don't know. I remember that at the last, I was with Nona and boy. The war was over. I was sick. Yes, that was it—very, very sick. They had me in bed. Nona was bending over me. I can see her now—so beautiful. It was getting dark, but Nona said——"

He stopped short.

"Nona said——" I prompted gently.

"Yes, I recall it now. Nona said I must fight the darkness that was creeping upon me. But I couldn't. It came—darkness and silence. Slowly. But everything was growing black. And Nona's voice imploring me not to go, grew dimmer—far away—dimmer and darker—everything dark, and then—I was gone."

"Dead?" I said softly. What did he mean? What could it all mean, except what the rational officials of the Institution said?

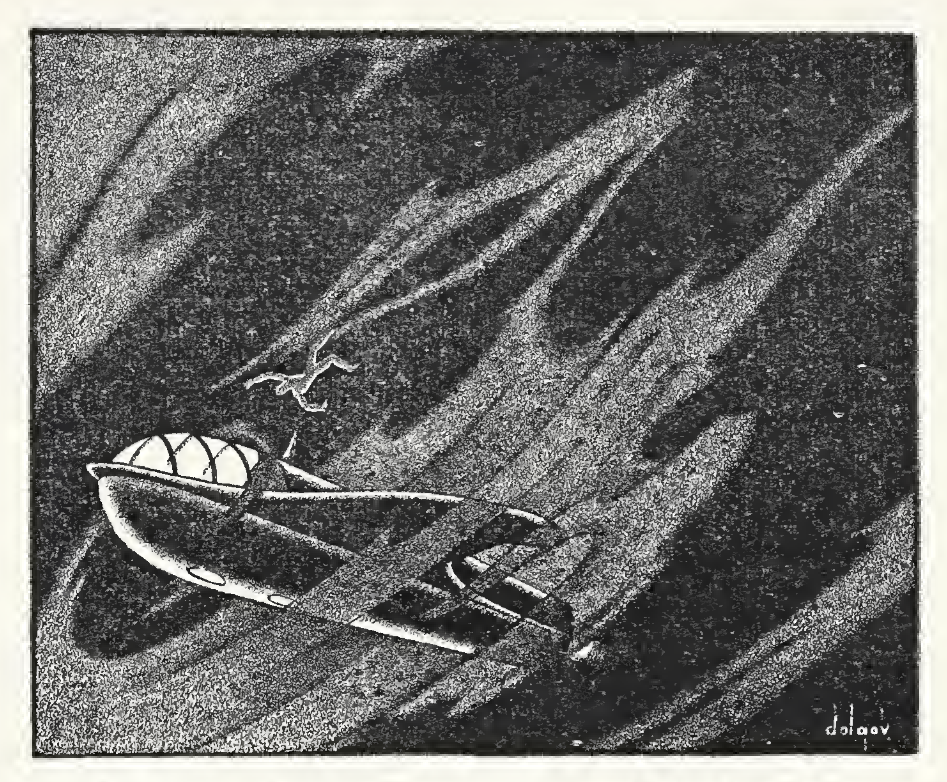
He shook himself slightly. "Did I say dead? I don't know whether I mean that or not. I don't know what I mean. Blackness—nothingness—and then I found myself on one of your horrible crowded streets here on Earth. An old man—cheated out of all those years of life—grown old and feeble, when last I had been young and strong. And my Nona and boy gone——"

He was trembling now; and suddenly he turned on me.

"Go away, please. It—it hurts me to think these thoughts. My Nona gone——"

If any of you care to advance your theories, I shall be glad to hear from you.

RAY CUMMINGS.



THE THOUGHT - FEEDERS

by R. R. WINTERBOTHAM

(Author of "The Time Maker", "Status Quo", etc.)

High in the stratosphere the two pilots encountered the living clouds and found out what it meant to eat your words—literally!

THE INVENTOR, Dr. Kempster Duerkes, was in his best spirits, which made him nearly as sparkling as a sphinx. His new airplane, the stratosphere scout, had risen from the ground eight miles in the air.

"It works!" he beamed in ecstasy, watching the altimeter.

"It's a neat job," admitted the pilot, Captain Lewis Hawes, condescendingly. Inventors were nice, but they were vastly overrated. The men who flew the planes, not the men who built them, made all the discoveries in aviation.

"Neat job?" Dr. Duerkes frowned at the understatement. "My boy, it's perfection! The ship is faultless as the logic of the universe!"

Dr. Duerkes regarded pilots as being mentally under-aged people who did their best to retard aviation by regarding all new inventions and refinements as crackpot ideas.

With this gulf of disrespect lurking between them it was strange that these two men should have become companions. However, they did have a few things in common. Although Dr. Duerkes called Captain Hawes a boy, there was scarcely any difference in actual ages—with exception noted for Dr. Duerkes' idea of the captain's men-

tal age. Besides, both men had a high regard for the stratosphere and the stratosphere scout formed a bond between them. It was a strange companionship, but stranger things were about to happen.

"If I tried to imitate the logic of the universe," the captain retorted, "I'd never be able to do a thing. The only real logic in the universe is man's. He invented the sport of making one and one equal two."

"Nonsense!" Dr. Duerkes replied stiffly. "The universe is an orderly thing. It obeys fixed laws. It never varies in its course. The universe is one thing we can depend upon."

"If you ask me," Captain Hawes said, sending the plane up another thousand feet, "anything can happen."

The heating equipment and the artificially sustained atmosphere of the plane's cabin made the men quite comfortable as the craft skimmed along at close to 45,000 feet.

Dr. Duerkes clasped his hands over his knees and beamed. He was about to say something, but he never got the words out of his mouth. For at that moment the plane lurched.

"Ump!" grunted Dr. Duerkes.

"Air pocket," Captain Hawes explained.

"There are no air pockets here," the doctor retorted. "We're in the stratosphere—the region of weatherless atmosphere. There might be winds, but no air pockets."

"Air pocket anyhow!" Captain Hawes insisted. "This ain't a textbook. This is the real thing."

If Dr. Duerkes had flown as many ships as the captain, he'd know how it felt to bump through an air pocket. Captain Hawes would not be surprised if he found air pockets in the moon's nonexistent atmosphere.

"Strange!" the inventor murmured. He gazed out of the window. He saw something stranger still.

It was a curiously shaped cloud, colored green.

"Umph!" Dr. Duerkes grunted again. "Who'd expect a cloud this high?"

Captain Hawes looked away from the controls and gasped. He strained against his safety belt as he put the ship through a series of intricate gyrations. A smooth, well-modulated stream of cuss words broke from his lips.

"By the wings of Pegasus!" the captain cried. "That wasn't an air pocket! Some idiot A. A. gunner is shooting at us!"

Even as he spoke a second green cloud appeared beside the first and the ship lurched again, even as a faint *pop,* like a distant explosion, came to the fliers' ears.

Captain Hawes switched on the radio and called to the ground crew.

"Is there a war down there?" the pilot asked. "If there ain't, tell that gun crew to cease firing. If there is, tell 'em to stop anyhow, because we ain't an enemy ship!"

"No one's firing, sir!" came the radio operator's voice. "There must be some mistake."

"Mistake—hell!" the captain roared. "I know anti-aircraft bursts when I see them!"

Dr. Duerkes made a mental note that a minute before Captain Hawes had called them air pockets.

The ship lurched again, then it bounced upward like a rubber ball. The whole craft seemed to be enveloped in a greenish cloud. A familiar, yet unidentifiable odor assailed the captain's nostrils. The motor coughed and died.

"Unloosen your safety belt," the captain ordered. "Get ready to bail out as soon as we get down where the air's thick enough to breathe."

The captain tried to start the motor again, but something was wrong with the supercharger.

"Must have been hit," he said.

There was a tinkle of glass and the air seemed to be sucked out of the cabin. Captain Hawes turned to see the cabin window falling out, but it wasn't that that made him turn pale.

Through the broken opening a greenish cloud was creeping into the plane. A long arm of vapor was extending itself toward the two men.

DR. DUERKES screamed as the cold, sticky moisture of the vaporous cloud closed about him. Hawes felt himself jerked out of his seat and he struggled helplessly as he was dragged through the window of the plane.

Below, he saw the bomber spinning crazily to earth. But neither man fell. Instead, they remained suspended in air, held fast by the billowing, green cloud.

An odd, cold feeling swept over Hawes. Oxygen was sucked from his lungs. He gasped for breath, wondering if this was the end of everything. As the light of day faded from his eyes he felt convinced that

it must be. A world of silence closed in about him.

As the chill of the stratosphere seemed to freeze the pilot's veins, he recognized the familiar odor he had smelled on the plane. It was ozone, oxygen exposed to the influence of electrical discharge, an allotropy of oxygen known to exist in the stratosphere.

For a time, all that remained of Captain Hawes' consciousness was a dim sense of awareness. From this tiny spark something grew. It enlarged until it swept over and mastered his entire being.

Suddenly Captain Hawes saw, but not through his eyes. He heard gentle whisperings about him, but not through his ears. The soft velvet of the green cloud pressed against his body, buoying it in the air, but he did not actually feel it. His nose no longer scented ozone, yet he was aware of the odor.

His senses were gone; in their place was a single, all-inclusive sense—an awareness of things first hand.

The limits of his weak, fallacious human signal system of neurones had been pushed aside and Captain Hawes and his companion stood in direct contact with the external world—possibly the first human beings ever to do so.*

No longer did Captain Hawes have to touch a thing to feel it. He knew the nature of the rocks on the moon as well as he knew the texture of his clothing. Without looking, he could tell Dr. Duerkes' movements as he opened his eyes and he knew that his own countenance was in no less degree bewildered and amazed.

Captain Hawes did not seem to exist within his body, but on the outside of it. His body was there, but it existed purely as a power plant for his omnipotent self.

"It's a man!" said something excitedly.

It was not exactly a voice Hawes heard. Instead, it was a thought, not expressed in words, but in translatable impulses.

"They're both men," came another impulse.

Captain Hawes was aware of a number of small greenish clouds sweeping down on all sides. Then, for the first time he saw that the stratosphere was far different than any human description had made it.

AROUND him arose a weird city. There were broad streets and buildings, vaporous, tenuous structures, but real as a single sense perceived it. The thought occurred to Hawes that this is what an American city would look like if it were stripped of noise, all tangible objects, all smells and things that could be perceived by the five senses. He knew that there was much more to a city than is ever seen by any man.

The cloud that bore the two human beings was floating through the streets toward a massive, rainbow building that rose like a palace in the center of the metropolis.

A wail, like an ambulance siren rose from the cloud. It was purely a mental wail, but the other clouds scurried out of the way to let the vapor bearing the men pass.

The building into which the men were taken rose like an eerie dream on the nothingness of its foundations.

"Great Scott!" whispered Duerkes. "What sort of a nightmare is this!"

"It's an unclassified part of your orderly universe," replied Captain Hawes. He suddenly discovered that he was not really speaking, nor was Duerkes talking through his mouth. The two men were communicating ideas by a sort of telepathy that went beyond their understanding.

A low murmur of excited ideas swept into the captain's perception as they entered the chamber. More poignant than all, a single, commanding thought arose from a pretty little turquoise cloud in the center of the room. The thought swept all others into silence and beat its way into the consciousness of the two human beings.

"You are welcome here, beings of the lower regions!"

"Thanks!" said Captain Hawes.

Dr. Duerkes was too busy thinking to reply. The doctor apparently had forgotten that his thoughts no longer were secret and that what he was thinking was perceptible to every person present.

"Am I alive? I do not breathe, yet I feel that I am absorbing ozone through my skin.

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*Philosophers have pointed out emphatically—and it is hardly necessary for me to repeat it—that man can know the world only "second hand." Man's consciousness perceives nothing directly, but through the medium of the senses. The translations of our sensory impulses in the brain could easily be —and often are—distorted. Artificial stimuli can affect the senses so that things can be perceived that do not actually exist. Like the blind men and the elephant, man is limited in his perceptions to what he can perceive, and therefore what we know may only be a small parcel of our surroundings. The stripping of Hawes and Duerkes of their senses and the placing of their consciousness in direct contact with the world allowed them to see things ordinary men do not behold—R. R. W.

I cannot be dead, for I possess consciousness. If I am neither, what am I doing here?"

"Your friend is disturbed, Captain Hawes," said the turquoise cloud.

"He has never been formally introduced to a green cloud before," the captain apologized. "Come to life, Doc! Meet the headman here!"

Mental laughter swept the room. Even the turquoise cloud joined.

Dr. Duerkes started. "Oh! Excuse me! I am happy to meet you, sir!"

"I must apologize for our appearance," said the turquoise cloud. "We appear as clouds, because we are a race of philosophers and we have too much work to do to waste our energies on the creation of beautiful figures. We might appear in any form we choose, but cloud-like forms are simple and easy to manage in the stratosphere. I must correct your impression, Mr. Hawes and Mr. Duerkes, that I am a man. I am not. . ."

As the cloud's thoughts impressed themselves on Captain Hawes' mind, it underwent a slow transformation. It dwindled in size and changed from turquoise to a beautiful olive shade. Its form swiftly became that of a human being. Then, before Hawes and Duerkes, stood a woman of dazzling beauty. She was dark complexioned. Her hair and eyes were dark. She was dressed in a cirrus mist of rainbow color.

Captain Hawes' thoughts were akin to a gape.

Dr. Duerkes looked with his mind stunned into a blank.

"Poor men," she said. "I pity you. You thought you were the highest form of life on the face of the earth, yet you are no further advanced in comparison to the Green Clouds than fish are in comparison to you."

She did not open her mouth but she spoke in waves of thought. Without her saying so, Captain Hawes knew her name was Loetta and somehow, as she spoke, Hawes perceived that in spite of this creature's claims to superiority, she needed man. Hawes and Duerkes had been brought here for a purpose. There was a problem to be solved and only man could solve it.

"Our lives lie one step in evolution beyond yours," Loetta went on, as though she were trying to erase the thoughts that crept into Hawes' mind. "First life on earth was plant life. It lived on the inanimate elements in the sea and rocks. Then came animal life, living in the sea and devouring the plants. Larger animals came to eat the small ones and life emerged from the sea onto the land. Man developed to eat the animals. We, the Green Clouds, are the next stage. Our food is thought—the mental imagery of lowly man."

The problem, at least, was down-to-earth. Even a creature that lived in the clouds had to have food.

"I should have known," Dr. Duerkes' thoughts staggered from his confused brain. "It is perfectly plausible. Everything is plausible, if one studies it long enough. It is inevitable that life should move some day into the stratosphere, just as it once moved out of the sea onto the land."

"Primitive thoughts," rebuked the woman. "We would not feed such slop to our half-wits." She turned to the aviator. "And what is the best you can do?"

Hawes was feasting his eyes on the cloud woman. "If I weren't sure I was awake, I'd say you were a nightmare," he began. "But you can't be a nightmare—nightmares are hideous—" he stopped abruptly.

Loetta smiled. "I liked that," said she.

"What?" Captain Hawes blushed mentally.

"What you did, just then. You pressed your lips against mine and made a loud smacking noise."

The flustered captain stammered: "But I—I didn't. Not really."

"In your mind you did," Loetta said. "It was a swell idea. A perfect feast."

"You mean that's what you live on?"

"Thought is our food and drink," she said. "We cannot eat our own thoughts, for that would be cannibalism. The wild crop that we collect at random over the earth is neither satisfying nor dependable. That is why we seek to cultivate our own foodstuffs. You two human beings will supply us with food. In time you will be mental giants."

"You made no mistake when you picked me," Dr. Duerkes beamed. "Already my thoughts are pretty well advanced."

"Your thoughts are quite obvious," Loetta retorted. "You simply have a knack of guessing the right answers and for most things there is more than one right answer. I'm afraid that we'll have to depend on Hawes to supply us with the staple foods. You can give us the lighter stuff—desserts and pastry—"

"Hawes! Why he never had a deep thought in his life!" Duerkes exclaimed.

"His thoughts are rather cute. Very simple, tender and digestible." She sighed. "It is funny none of us Green Clouds ever thought about kissing before."

Loetta took a step forward, threw her arms around Captain Hawes and planted a deep, fervent kiss on his lips.

"I think," Captain Hawes said, as he and his companion were led to a little garden of clouds, "that I am well enough stimulated to win a grand championship as a mental milch cow."

"Bah!" Dr. Duerkes snorted. "This is no superior race!"

THE Green Clouds insisted that their food be of the highest quality. But their standards were their own. Noble philosophy was carted away by the scavengers scarcely nibbled, while thrilling, exciting thoughts were bolted ravenously.

"Deep thoughts are too near our own," Loetta explained one day when she visited Hawes. "We find action stimulating, for life is rather dull up here."

She explained that exertion was almost unheard of in this land. People obtained food without a great deal of effort and there was really nothing to work for.

"We find Dr. Duerkes' thoughts hard to digest," she said, "but perhaps they will be better flavored in time."

Because life was so effortless, Hawes wondered how the people of this country escaped complete boredom. It was a nation where everyone was unemployed, for there was nothing to do. To build a house, one had merely to create it from thought. Thought also was food and the medium of exchange.

"Man misses a great deal," Loetta went on. "His five senses completely overlook the most worth-while things of life."

"There are all kinds of men. Have you ever really studied them?"

"I know all about them," replied Loetta. "That is why I can imitate men so easily. I can eat their food, just as you do. I drink their drinks. I have watched men die and I have lived as they lived. But it is too primitive."

Captain Hawes smiled as he recalled a few lines of Kipling:

"I have eaten your bread and salt,
I have drunk your water and wine,
The deaths ye died I have watched beside,
And the lives that ye led were mine."

"Yes," Loetta said, reading his mind, "I have even read Kipling. And I like it."

As days passed, Captain Hawes became more and more impressed with the power of thought. He found himself conjuring up fancy motor cars from nothing. He could dream of wealth and awaken surrounded by chests filled with gold and precious jewels. Thought had become a tangible substance, and as material as a piece of cheese. His thoughts became so prolific that the people of this land grew fat and comfortable.

But continual thinking is not a pleasant occupation for a man of action. The first weeks in the land of the Green Clouds had been full of novelty. Beyond that, only Loetta's presence made the place endurable. But there were times when Loetta was busy and Captain Hawes was left alone to produce thoughts. Life became boring.

Thinking no longer was an easy task. When he considered escaping, no one complained of the thought, for it was good food. The only difficulty was that the green clouds devoured his escape plans as fast as he made them.

ANYHOW, the escape looked impossible. Hawes' and Duerkes' parachutes had been taken away from them and a drop to the earth, eight miles straight down, would be quite fatal.

Even if the men survived the fall, there was the difficulty of getting started. Gravity seemed absent here as far as the earth was concerned. True, if one jumped up toward the sky, gravity worked as it always had. But if one tried to dive toward the earth, he was pulled back to the clouds just the same.

"Anyway, it's a slick arrangement," Hawes decided.

Dr. Duerkes shuddered. "How can these people like your hashy thoughts?" he asked. "This mystery would startle the world of science and you dismiss it with the words, 'slick arrangement.' "

"Well, maybe it ain't so slick. I'm sort of tired of it. I'd give a lot for a ham sandwich, with mustard."

In front of Hawes' eyes a ham sandwich on rye bread, dripping with mustard, appeared. Hawes reached out to grab it, but

a green cloud swooped from behind a bush and seized it.

"Tut, tut!" chided the green cloud. "You mustn't eat your own thoughts. That's cannibalism."

"But I'm hungry," said Captain Hawes.

"Then have a ham sandwich on me," said the cloud.

In the air in front of Hawes appeared another sandwich, exactly like the first. Hawes reached and seized it. He tasted it. It had a slightly sour taste, as if it were impregnated with ozone, but it was better than nothing.

"Swell!" said the captain.

"I can't understand it," Duerkes, who also was supplied with a sandwich, moaned. "It's beyond comprehension. This is a different world from ours. There isn't a single law of the universe applicable to it."

"It looks pretty logical to me," Hawes said. "These people think concrete thoughts, instead of abstract ones." He turned to the green cloud. "Could you think up an airplane—a stratosphere ship, like the one we rode to get here?"

"Easily," the green cloud said.

Standing before them was a ship, an exact duplicate of the stratosphere scout.

Not a word passed between the two human beings as they got into the ship. It wasn't necessary to think in order to know what should be done.

"Hey!" cried the green cloud. "Come back here. You can't go away—"

The green cloud ran toward the ship, but it could not destroy it, for to do so would have been murder. One's own thoughts are not to be destroyed by one's self. Hawes realized this. He had tried several times to build a plane, but it always was eaten by a green cloud the second he got it finished. But the green clouds could not eat their own thoughts.

The motor whirred.

"Just a minute, before we leave," the captain said. He closed his eyes. He thought hard of Loetta.

The figure of Loetta appeared in the control cabin beside him.

Captain Hawes touched the controls and the ship soared away.

"I hope you can learn to eat solid food, Loetta," the captain said.

Loetta sighed. She turned her head.

Captain Hawes turned his head also. Trailing from the ship, hanging like a chain of daisies, was a whole string of Loettas. One hung onto the wing, while the one below her clasped her ankles.

"Gosh!" Captain Hawes said. "I didn't realize I had been thinking of you all the time."

"Don't worry," said Loetta.

As she spoke a green cloud flashed out of the heavens and calmly began eating her sisters.

Captain Hawes put his ship into a dive toward the earth.

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STATION X

The Ayes and Noes of Fandom

(You are invited to send your letters of comment upon FUTURE FICTION, and science fiction in general, for publication in this department, to FUTURE FICTION, 60 Hudson Street, New York City.)

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Cheerio fans and readers. As we go to press, there's considerable time left before the "A Million Years and a Day" contest closes, so we'll have to wait until the next issue to announce the winners.

However, we hereby announce another contest, one which we expect to make a permanent feature of Future Fiction. When you write in your letter of comment upon this issue, let me know which you think is the best letter in Station X this time. The writer of the letter receiving the highest number of votes will receive the original of the double-spread illustration for our lead story. Don't merely send in a vote, because it won't be counted unless it accompanies a letter of criticism upon the current Future Fiction. We shall publish as many of your letters as possible, and, next time, readers will vote on what you write in this time.

And now for our authors, this issue. Ray Cummings needs no introduction. We'll merely state that this story is one which we saw mentioned in readers' columns many years ago, when readers and fans were asking for reprints. That is where we first heard of it.

E. A. Grosser has come up in science-fiction fairly recently and has contributed to a good many of our contemporaries. You liked his "Radiant Avenger" in a recent issue, so here he is again.

Dom Passante should not be unknown to you, as he's been listed on our contents page, and on the contents pages of our late sister magazine, a good many times. You have always seemed to like his tales, and that is as good a way as any of saying you want more.

R. R. Winterbotham is gradually setting himself a higher and higher standard to upkeep. We think you'll like his offering this time, too.

And, finally, Martin Pearson offers a tale which should appeal to your sense of humor. Pearson has been popping up in our contemporary stf mags, so we're glad to have grabbed him first in the Spring Quarterly. He is eager to do a series of short tales around the amusing Ajax Calkins, so be sure to let us know what you think of our hero's misadventures on "Pogo Planet."

Need we mention that the cover is by Hannes Bok? You've asked for him a long time since, so here he is. Recently we had him dash off a few autobiographical notes, and received the following: "Bok. Five foot ten, brown eyes and hair. Weight 160. Likes candy, Sibelius, and red heads. Hates neckties. Gets into hysterical dithers over rush work, sits up 'til dawn on the stuff. *Loves* fan encouragement. Makes unsuspecting visitors pose for him, so don't say you weren't warned. His favorite people are those who accept him as he is: overalls, dirty sport shirt, and all. He eats, sleeps, and drinks pictures. I tell you the guy's *weird.*"

Dolgov, who drew for "The Shadowless World" and "Time Marker" last time, is more difficult to get hold of, but someday we'll tie him down and get a statement from him. Dolgy's shy. He wouldn't believe us when we told him the nice things you'd said about his work and when we showed him exhibits a, b, c, d, e, and so on, the dazed expression on his face was killing to behold. He and Bok have collaborated on some of the drawings this time, thus you see them signed Dolbokov.

Want to know how we rate stories in accordance with your comments? We have a chart listing all titles. We then fill this chart with the following signs: (1), (v), (+), (/), (-), and (0). They indicate, first place in the book, very good, good, indifferent (fair—so-so, etc.), disliked, and phew! respectively. In counting the scores they rate 10, 10, 5, 0, -5, and -10 respectively. Since few readers list all the stories, the divisor is usually different in each case.

Here's how they rated this time:

1. "The Shadowless World" by Oliver Saari 8.6
2. "The Time Maker" by R. R. Winterbotham 8.0
3. "The Barbarians" by William Morrison 7.9
4. "The Topaz Gate" by James Blish .. 7.1
5. "The Stone Men of Ignota" by Victor Rousseau 6.4
6. "A Million Years and a Day" by Lawrence Woods 6.3
7. "They Never Come Back" by Fritz Leiber, Jr. 5.0

Forte's cover rated 7.5, Station X received 10, Futurian Times 9, the editorial 8.3 and Morley's article 8.1. We feel very happy when we note that the story which placed last, seventh out of seven, obtained an average of 5, which means that you liked it. Any positive rating on the final score shows that the story came out ahead of the game, but it has to get five to be considered good. A final score of ten means that it is really outstanding, and a final score of first place—that would mean that everyone who mentioned it so rated it—makes for a classic.

One thing more before we turn the station over to you: we have a sister magazine, Science Fiction Quarterly. The current issue is particularly significant, one which you won't want to miss. We are featuring one of the most unique tales of tomorrow ever written, a story now recognized as a classic. We refer to "Tarrano the Conqueror" by Ray Cummings. It is available on your newsstand, so may we suggest a hasty excursion there before the copies are sold out. Of course, you can get one by sending 25 cents to this office, but that would involve waiting a day or so. Besides the novel, you'll find a first-class selection of short tales. The cover is by Frank R. Paul, the interior drawings by Bok, Burford and Dolbokov.

Okay, then. Don't forget to write in, and address your letters to:

ROBERT W. LOWNDES
Editor FUTURE FICTION
60 Hudson Street,
New York City

We hear first from

BILL STOY

Crawling up one day from the dark, dank, and dismal subterranean caverns which I inhabit, I accidentally ran into a subway newsstand and, in sheer desperation, traded three metal engravings of Jefferson for the August FF. Was I astounded, amazed, astonished, startled, and filled with great wonder to note a tremendous improvement! You can't do this to us, Doc! For some time now, although s-f fans would have extremely divergent opinions about which s-f mag was best, they could at least agree that FF was one of the worst. But not any more. It's things like this that crack the morale of fandom!

All kidding aside, you are doing a fine job of renovation. Frinstance, look at the art dept., whose only asset was Paul until you added Bok and Forte. Then, too, not many editors would have taken a chance on a cover by a new artist like Forte. But you did, and your hunch proved to be a success.

As for the stories, there is still plenty of room for improvement, but at least a good start has been made. Perhaps such a swell yarn as "The Barbarians" is but a harbinger of the future? At any rate, let's have more stories by Morrison. The two stories in second and third place respectively are "They Never Come Back" and "The Shadowless World."

For once "Station X" looks like a real s-f letter section, but sometimes I wonder what I would have done without my electronic microscope? Other articles also interesting, especially "Futurian Times."

Yngvi *is* a louse! How *dare* you even think otherwise!

140-92 Burden Crescent,
Jamaica, New York

It's like this, Mr. Stoy. What basis have we for assuming that Yngvi is a louse? Only the unsupported statement of a jailbird. And, from the remarks of supposedly reliable sources, an addle-pated jailbird at that. Now we don't want to pose as the final authorities on this matter, Bill, nor have we any desire to squelch you or anyone else; we're just calling the affair as we see it. If you, or anyone else, can bring forth evidence to prove us wrong, we're ready to change our opinion. But, after all, don't you think it a bit unjust to dub Yngvi a louse on so flimsy a footing?

And here's a note upholding our stand from

J. W. DRUBBLE, JR.

We wish to extend to you, on behalf of our poor slandered client Yngvi, our thanks for your public rebuttal of his alleged louseship.

For too long, now, Yngvi has been defamed in personal character; and it will make you happy, we are sure, to learn that slander proceedings against Tovarich are proceeding quite well, if we may redundate.

May we count on you for further support of our client in his attempt at regaining his good name?

Decker, Indiana

We won't comment upon that, but go on to

R. R. WINTERBOTHAM

I finished the current issue of Future Fiction and the yarns are interesting. I won't pass any judgment on my own story, for fear of putting myself on the spot, but Fritz Leiber's story was a knockout. He has a swell little style and his story moved right along. In second place, I think Saari's "Shadowless World" ought to go. "The Topaz Gate" comes in third and Rousseau and Morrison were pretty close together. I didn't care for the short short, but I never like those things anyhow and it wasn't any fault of the writer, it's just me. Incidentally, in passing my judgment, it is purely my own opinion and the way the story strikes me. I don't care how smooth a story is, or how much literature the writer has on the ball—what is literature anyhow?—I like stories or I don't like 'em. I think most people are the same way. I've written a number of stories myself I didn't like after they got into print, and some which I liked better after they were printed than before.

420 West Kansas
Pittsburg, Kansas

We'd say offhand that most people (ourselves included) either like stories or don't like 'em, and such things as style, etc., are for the most part afterthoughts. Of course, there are times when the style of a story hits you between the eyes from the first and you get so taken up with *how* the story is told that you often forget about the story itself.

As for literature—we'd rather not put ourselves out on a limb on it, but put the question up to the readers and stick in a few words edgewise later. And, incidentally, Mr. Winterbotham, we hope you don't mind too much our having used you as a guinea pig. You see, we feel that there's no reason for discriminating between authors and non-competing readers, when it comes to selecting letters for this department. Your opinions should be as valuable as those of anyone else—in fact, being an expert, you might be able to offer more incisive and constructive criticism in some cases.

Now, we present

I. V. DANIEL

It's nice to see the new writers in the science fiction field turning in such swell stuff. Just about the time fans (including myself) were beginning to think we were going to have the "poor" always with us. Not that some of the established writers aren't as good as ever—but Lawrence Woods' little short cut to insomnia was *really* good.

351 W. 19th Street,
NYC

Sorry to have to cut you short, but since the rest of your letter was dealing with a solution to the problem in "A Million Years and a Day," we had to do so. Thus, we turn matters over to

ANTONY DIRKA

I have just managed to get hold of the latest two issues of your magazines, Future Fiction and Science Fiction, and am reporting on them herein.

First of all, why is it that one magazine stands out so much above the other? With the same publisher, the same editor, the same general makeup, it seems to me that the magazines should be about the same. But where one magazine is lower in the scale of science fiction than any other published today, the other strikes me as being one of the five very best.

Take the latest Science Fiction, for instance. You have a story by one very good writer, and two by other writers who can usually be counted upon to write the kind of stories that drag in fan mail. Yet I can say without hesitation that there is not a story in the entire issue—and there were only four, by the way—which is worth a second's time to any reader. Willard E. Hawkins, in the two other stories of his that I've read—in magazines other than yours—did excellent jobs on both. I had come to rank him as among my favorites, just on the basis of those two. This story—I don't know what to say about it. The most merciful thing I can do for the author, I guess, is just to forget I ever read it.

Now look at the latest Future Fiction. The cover on it is as good as anything I've ever seen in any of your magazines (have I mentioned that one of the things I had against that issue of Science Fiction was the *terrible* Paul cover?) The stories do not entirely come up to the standard of the last issue, but most of them were still very good. "The Topaz Gate," "The Stone Men of Ignota," and "The Time Maker" were almost a tie for first place, with "A Million Years and a Day" making a nice change-in-pace as an interesting little short-short.

The illustrations, of course, were almost as bad as those in Science Fiction—which means perfectly terrible. The bad artwork is about all that keeps Future Fiction from giving the leaders in the science fiction field a run for their money. A couple of darn good artists that appear elsewhere, but not in your books, are Angus Dun and Leo Morey.

The departments in both magazines have been pretty good, with an upturn noticeable lately.

If you want to know the kind of authors one reader would like to see in your magazines, they are S. D. Gottesman, James MacCreigh, Robert A. Heinlein, and Hugh Raymond. Of course, if you can get the real old-timers, you might do well with C. L. Moore, Jack Williamson, Henry Kuttner, and E. E. Smith, PhD, and others like them who used to appear regularly but do not any more.

But for my money, the newer authors are as good as the old—and they have that spark of originality that the older ones lack, though they (sic) make up for it with better workmanship, more carefully drawn characters, etc.

Box 332, Wurtsboro, N. Y.

Just consider a moment, Mr. Dirka. If both of our books had been exactly the same, what would have been the sense of having two titles. Our aim was to hit both types of readers, for we thought those who liked the kind of stories we ran in Science Fiction would dislike the Future Fiction variety. However, we have found that most of our readers read both magazines and that we didn't have the two distinct audiences we expected—which is another reason for combining the two books as of this issue.

The majority of readers, we note, do not agree with you in regard to FF's artwork; the enthusiasm with which the drawings of Bok and Dolgov have been received is something to sing about.

Now, here is

BOB STUDLEY

I've just finished reading the August issue of FF and let me tell you that it was the first one that can really be considered *good*.

The story I liked best was "The Barbar-

ians" by William Morrison. I especially liked the idea of building graveyards with nothing in them to prove that the colonists were loyal fighters.

"The Time Maker" came in a close second, followed by "The Stone Men of Ignota," "A Million Years and a Day," "The Shadowless World," "The Topaz Gate," and "They Never Come Back," in that order. The last named was the only story I didn't enjoy.

"Futurian Times" and "Station X" are two swell departments, except that the news in the "Times" is dated, of course.

West 109th Street,
N. Y. C.

We're going to try to revise the setup of Futurian Times so that the material therein will be more dateless. Let's hear from you on this current number of it. Now, we introduce

DAMON KNIGHT

The thing that strikes me most about the August FF is that six out of the seven stories were presented enticingly enough to get me over the "hump"—to make me start reading them. After which, of course, I finished them. The stories themselves, I thought, were only fair, but that's not the point. With illustrations, titles and blurbs you interested me in the plots of six out of seven—and that, I think, is good editing, and shows promise of better things to come.

The cover interested me because it's astonishingly good for Forte. It, and his inside pix for the issue, still show signs of that ridiculous Raymond-Krupa anatomy, but they're improving.

As to the Bok and Dolgov drawings, nothing better could be asked. The Dolgov for "Shadowless World" in particular is one of the two or three most beautiful stf illustrations I have ever seen. In the future I'd like to see a little less Forte, some Giunta, and maybe some more by Burford and Kyle. Paul is acceptable in small doses, and, of course, Dold if you can get him.

What's left? Oh yes, Futurian Times. I like the idea of this department, even though it's usually, of necessity, old stuff to the active fan. The items you print are doubtlessly new to most of your readers, and any one of them may be the catalyst that transforms a reader-collector into a fan.

Salem, Oregon

Dave Kyle, we're sorry to say, is pretty well occupied these days, and has little or no time for drawing, though we hope to get a pic from him once in a while; Dan Burford is also unavailable for the most part. However, we have a couple of new artists in mind, and expect to present samples of their work soon; watch for them. In the meantime, you readers have shown your approval of Paul, Bok, Dolgov, and Forte, which means that they'll be appearing regularly here.

Incidentally, Damon, we'd like to use your note for a point; you mention that we managed to interest you in six out of seven stories in the August book—but you didn't say on which one we failed to stir you. Not being mind readers, we can't know what you consider to be our failings unless you tell us; how about being more explicit next time, eh?

And this, friends and fans, just about finishes our broadcast for this issue, so we'll be seeing you in the mails soon, we hope. Matter of fact, perhaps we'll be seeing some of you in Denver soon, because we expect to leave the end of this week. Until then, happy reading with Future Fiction, tales of tomorrow! Sincerely, RWL.



POGO PLANET

by MARTIN PEARSON

(Author of "Cosmos Eye", "The Unfinished City", etc.)

Introducing that modest little superman, that shrinking violet of destiny, Ajax Calkins, and a world where you had to hop, in some way, to get where you wanted to go!

As MY SHIP hit the darkness that was the outer atmosphere of Mid-planet, I thrilled to the thought that I, Ajax Calkins, had at last achieved my rightful place among the pioneers of space. Even when my ship bounced on the green soil, flew end over end upwards to come down ka-plunk in the wrong side of a gooey thick swamp, I exulted that I was the first in possession of a major planet that had been overlooked by the rest of the interplanetary crowd.

As I picked myself up from the midst of a pile of miscellaneous equipment, hiking ropes, elephant guns, para-rays, spare shoes and cans of Unifood, and rubbed my

bruised arms and head, I thought of how many millions would give their all to be in my place.

Midplanet! How the whole system had thrilled when its discovery was finally determined last year! For decades science had known there was a planet between Saturn and Uranus, ever since Pickering had proved the perturbations of those planets' orbits pointed to a body between them. Yet telescopes had always failed to detect it. Few had taken it seriously. Yet, it was there.

It was discovered finally by electromagnetic deduction coils at the Mars Prime Observatory. It was rechecked from Flagstaff and searched for by Tycho Eye. The latter could not see it. It was still invisible, a strangely dark world.

It was then that I conceived my great idea. For years I had secretly nourished my grievance against the world into which I found myself born. All the great heroic acts had been done. The major planets pioneered, Gretelspoon had at last opened up Pluto, and there was nothing left for me to do to show that I too was made of godlike stuff. But Midplanet . . . there was my chance!

Hastily I outfitted a small space-ship with all that I would need. Hastily but craftily I had the orbits charted and the controls processed. My destiny was always certain for had it not been my destiny to come into a large fortune early in life? Surely this had been ordained?

Then I had hurtled through space towards Midplanet alone, secretly. The world would not know of my triumph until I returned to tell them and receive their adoring plaudits. Months went past while I endured the hardships of space-sickness, the cosmitch, and voidal ague.

At last Midplanet loomed dark in the celestial panorama. Still it cast no light, still it was a black orb sailing silently on its mighty orbit, unattended by any moon.

Finding that my ship was irrevocably destined to hit the planet, I determined to land rather than turn back. So it came about that I plunged down through the darkness and found to my amazement that after several hundred yards of opaque gaseous envelope, I emerged into brilliant blue sky and rapidly approached the green surface.

After the crash and after I had picked myself up and rubbed arnica on my black-and-blue spots, the problem of the dark planet turned light demanded my attention.

I realized that some strange gas or mixture of gases chanced to make up the outermost strata of the atmosphere of Midplanet. A gaseous compound that absorbed light one way but would not pass it once it had struck the surface of the planet. So that above the planet remained swathed in lightless mystery, while below the sky seemed to radiate blue and the lighting and warmth was held in to appear as a beautiful spring day on Earth.

This then had been the circumstance which had kept Midplanet veiled from the sight of man until I, Ajax Calkins, tore aside the veil. I felt a glow of warmth suffuse my body with pride for this accomplishment.

BUCKLING a para-ray to my belt (for I did not think heavier weapons were necessary in this peaceful looking scene), I stepped to the door of the ship and forced it open. At my feet the swamp oozed and gurgled. A scant distance away the bank of solid ground lay. I leaped the distance and I am proud to say misjudged it by a mere foot or so. Dragging myself out of the thick gummy mess I clambered to the bank of the strangely greenish soil, placed one foot forward, scowled, and raised my right hand.

"I hereby take possession of this land in my name, Ajax Calkins, and proclaim it subject to my will as Emperor." This I pronounced with firm dignity becoming a Magellan or a Cortez.

You may seem surprised that I should make myself ruler of this land and not merely annex it to the Interplanetary Union? Why should that surprise you? Was it not mine by right of priority? And how, indeed, do you think kingdoms and empires are won?

I am not a modest man. I have always said that I am a man of great destiny. Why should I bow to traditions?

Having satisfied my will, I looked about.

Before me stretched a long rolling plain, green as if covered with fields of grass. Yet it was not grass but a curious green hard clay that seemed to make up the soil. Far to the distance low hills rose. The oddest feature of the soil was the fact that it was interminably interlaced with deep sharp cracks like a clay that had been baked improperly and cracks all over.

It seemed to me that there was a strange

discoloration far off in the base of the hills from which white and grey plumes of vapor arose as if marking the factories of some hillside city. A city it could well prove to be and if that were so, then I had found a capital and subjects!

I set out to walk the several miles to the hills. I had sufficient equipment for such a reconnoiter already on me.

The going was not easy. The ground was flat and hard enough to walk on, but the deep cracks and narrow crevices which one constantly came across made the trip difficult. I would have to leap perilously over the more narrow cracks or else carefully find a way around the wider ones.

It seemed to me that it would be difficult to make roads across such a terrain, the bridges would be innumerable. I wondered how the natives got around. I had seen no sign of animals as yet, but that was not to be considered surprising if there were a city so near. There were plants, a large number scattered here and there in clumps, reddish and greenish masses somewhat like the vegetation of our American Western deserts.

After walking and jumping and still more walking and leaping I became tired after about an hour. The city was still a distance away but it could now be seen with greater distinctness. It was indeed what I had thought, a cluster of buildings obviously constructed for intelligent beings and there were indeed columns of smoke rising from them. More than that I could not distinguish.

I had come across no roads as yet which was odd if this were a city though comprehensible considering the nature of the ground.

At last I saw a building of some sort in my path. It was a small structure, hardly more than a frame-work construction of clay. I made my way to it and looked at it. The building itself was nothing, just a frame-work as I had said. It was what was propped up beside it that puzzled and amazed me.

It was a nine-foot cylinder of shining metal. About the middle of this metal shaft was fixed a circular frame. There were a number of what might be controls set in the cylinder just above this central railwork and a large mass like a doughnut running underneath the metal hoop which might have held an engine of some sort. The bottom of the shaft was capped by a large rubbery mass.

I could not figure out what this was. I stood it upright (it was not too heavy) and looked at it from all directions. It was a puzzle. Then I climbed on to the hoop affixed to its middle and sat down. The central shaft ran between my legs, the engine was under me and the controls faced me. It occurred to me that here was a machine designed to be operated by someone in my position and of my general size.

BECAUSE I am afraid of nothing, I touched the controls and pressed them. Below me there was a sort of murmuring and rumbling. Then the cylinder seemed to vibrate slightly, to grow more tense. I grasped the metal bar tightly.

There was a terrifying hiss and then a terrific crash and the cylinder suddenly hurtled into the air. I held on for dear life, my composure dreadfully shaken. The whole machine bounced upwards into the air and then came down on its rubber-capped bottom. I held on. It hit, a shaft within the cylinder contracted and absorbed the shock and suddenly flicked out again and up we went.

As I grasped the main tube for dear life I realized what it was. A pogo stick! A giant, mechanically controlled, powered pogo stick!

Up and down, jarring and violent, down and up. I was dizzy and ill and I didn't know how to stop it. It was progressing madly in the general direction of the city. I pushed buttons wildly when I wasn't holding on for dear life but I didn't seem to get the right combination.

The stick would hurtle wildly forward into the air many dozens of feet then come down to hit the earth with a shock, contract, and then recoil violently again and up with a sickening jolt into the air again.

I saw that it was a means for travel over terrain impassible because of its crevices and cracks to wheeled vehicles or beings on foot. I saw this as the unguided power-pogo came down directly into a narrow crack. The capped bottom slid between the sides, the engine box hit the sides of the narrow cleft hard, there was a terrific kick and the shaft hit out again futilely in the airy emptiness of the depth below it, and I went sailing out head over heels to land several yards away in the midst of a band of Midplanetarians.

The next thing I knew I was being pinned down by a number of grey fuzzy arms while a kangaroo looked down at me and ques-

tioned me in a squeaky language. At least it looked like a kangaroo for it had the giant legs and the long powerful tail of one, it had upstanding mousey ears, a pointed rodentlike face, and a mammalian body covered with short grey-brown hair. Around its waist was strapped a belt-like harness from which several pouches were slung. In one hand it held a weapon like a sort of combination of pistol and sling-shot.

Naturally I did not answer its questions. It, the chief kangaroo-man, shrugged its shoulders and motioned to its fellows who were holding me down. They allowed me to get to my feet when I was surprised to find that I was still all in one piece and that they had not touched my equipment including my para-ray.

A little distance away was standing a simply gigantic power-pogo, towering a couple of dozen feet high, with a large circular platform set around its middle. Facing that they started to walk towards there. Started, I say, for they walked in kangaroo leaps and I simply fell when they tried to make me do the same.

They picked me up bodily and bounded over and up to the platform. There they hold on to straps attached to the main cylinder and waited. I think I must have fainted because I have no recollection of the trip outside of a nightmare of terrible leaps and falls.

WHEN I came to again it was in the city by the hills. Several of the creatures were standing around me trying to question me in their odd language and, of course, making no headway. I felt that this was not the time to inform them of my imperial accession, I was not sure that they were the most fitting inhabitants of this world to receive that honor. There might be other intelligent races inhabiting the same planet even as there are on Venus.

Accordingly I kept my mouth shut and stared them down. That was a feat of which I could be proud considering the odd nature of their eyes and faces.

Finally they led me away in short bounds to a building and up a ramp to a room. There they thrust me and closed the door.

The room was large, partly open to an interior patio. But it had another inhabitant. A girl!

She was standing by the open semi-balcony staring into the courtyard. When I exclaimed, she turned sharply and looked at me.

She was dressed surprisingly like an earth girl, she looked very much like the earth type. I congratulated myself on having picked for my empire a planet which held a race so similar to my own. But my hopes were dashed two seconds later when she opened her mouth and said in perfect English:

"Hello, stranger, how'd you get to Midplanet so soon?"

I recovered my composure and introduced myself modestly, not telling her of the position I had taken upon myself. "And who are you?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm Nadia Landor and I came with the Official I. U. Expedition. Our ship is about thirty miles away and I came here on a geological survey in a single-seater flier. I stopped to say hello but our hosts don't seem to know the meaning of the word."

"Oh," I said and fell silent. What was I to say? I had been so certain that I could get to Midplanet first and now it seemed that the Union had beaten me out again. Then, I squared my shoulders. This was no way for Ajax Calkins, Emperor of at least half Midplanet, to act. My destiny would see me through.

"You need have no fear," I said. "I will find a way for us to escape."

She looked at me oddly and smiled. "Oh that? That's all settled. We'll escape immediately if you want to. I've fixed things with our buggy friend."

"With whom?" I gasped.

"Why, haven't you seen the buggers yet? Look, there's Bosco in the yard." She beckoned to the inner courtyard. I went over to her side and looked.

IN THE courtyard, standing just below us stood a monstrous insect. A thing somewhat larger than a horse. A big squat compact looking broad-backed creature. For a moment I stared at it without comprehension and then suddenly its appearance struck a responsive chord in my brain. It was a flea, a gigantic flea!

"Isn't he cute?" murmured Nadia. "He's agreed to help us escape."

"He's what? Do you mean to say he's . . ." I started.

"Intelligent?" she finished. "Yes, the buggers have a rather high intelligence. Not as good as our kangaroo friends but none-theless clever. The fleas are a sort of semi-

barbarian group inhabiting a section about a thousand miles away. This fellow, whom I call Bosco, was captured and doesn't like the idea of making a banquet for some kangaroo holiday."

I goggled at the creature and it stared with an interested flicker of its feelers at me.

"I'm glad you still have your para-ray. It was all that I was missing. Come on, let's go now." Nadia suited her actions to her words by vaulting the stone balustrade and landing astride the monster bug's back. I gingerly followed her and seated myself in front.

"Now what?" I said for I didn't know how this was going to help us escape.

"Hold tight and use your ray when the guard appears," she said and then screamed at the top of her lungs. I was nearly paralyzed myself with the sound but the guard who opened the gate was more so and I beamed him nicely.

Bosco seemed to sink lower and then his monstrously powerful legs smashed down and we made the most colossal bound I have ever dreamed of. That super-flea must have covered at least three hundred yards with that first bound and he must have made two hundred at least with every subsequent bounce.

We held on for dear life and the air whished past us like mad. Behind us the city of kangaroos sprang to life as they saw their assorted prisoners escaping and very soon I saw over my shoulder that a line of gigantic steam-powered pogos were bounding along after us, each manned by several armed creatures.

The flea was fast but the pogos, powered by terrific steam-boilers, were equally so. And thus we raced across the clay creviced terrain, two humans on the back of a flea-colossus followed by a single-file line of puffing steel pogos, their plumes of smoke leaving a trail behind them.

I turned and tried to pick off the riders with my ray but it was hopeless so violently was everything going up and down. I gave up and clung for dear life to the hard neck of our steed.

But it seemed to be impossible to shake off our followers. They remained fast on our trail and after a while I realized that Bosco was tiring out, his leaps were not so high or far.

"WHAT shall we do?" called Nadia to me. "We can't shake them."

It was then that the idea occured to me that saved us. We were already very close to where my spaceship had landed and I succeeded to conveying in signals what I had in mind to our quite intelligent flea.

On we went and when we came to the side of the swamp in which my ship had landed, Bosco gave a terrific leap which must have well set a record for all Mid-planet and sailed fully five hundred yards across the swamp to land exhausted on the other side.

But the pogos could not make that great leap, nor could the giant things stop so easily. On they rushed and one after another they landed in the middle of that thick gummy deep swamp-like mass. The automatic vibrations of their shafts continued but their bases were hopelessly gummed in. The crews were hurled off in all directions and fell helplessly into the gooey morass.

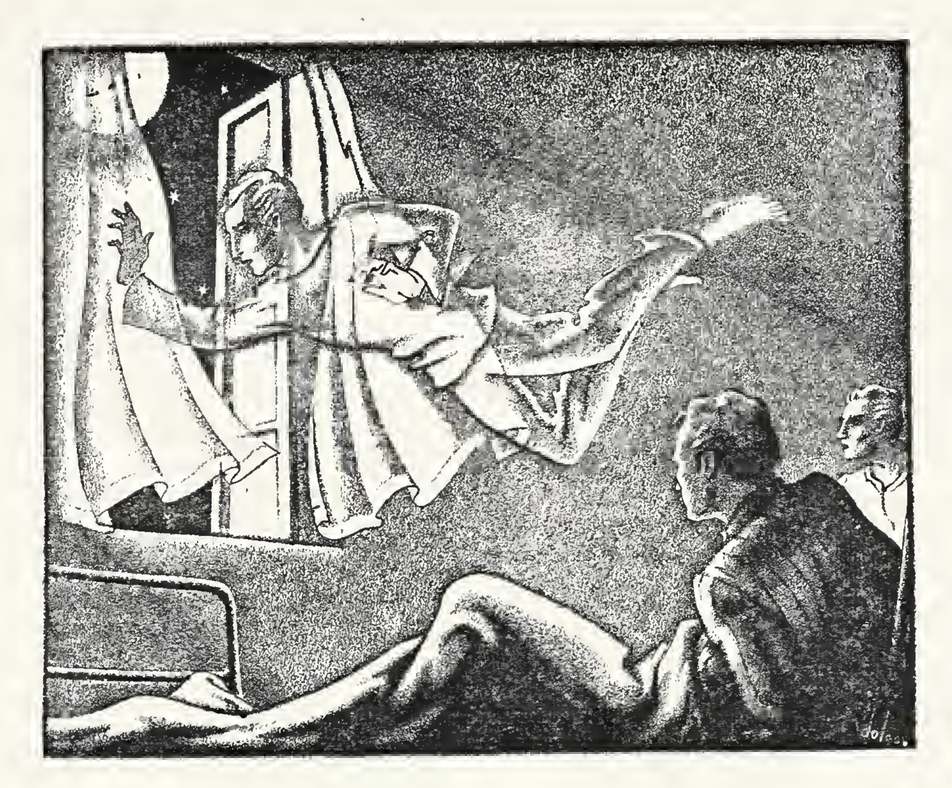
We were saved! My ship was around at the other side but we could walk it. Nadia signalled our thanks to the bugger and it bounded off alone towards the distant horizon.

As we walked, Nadia complimented me on my trick of the swamp. I glowed within and, turning to her, said:

"Let us stay here and master this world, my Empress. I, Ajax Calkins, lay my heart and a planet at your feet."

But women are fickle creatures and cannot understand the ways of the great. She laughed and said: "Don't be silly, my husband is waiting for me at our own spaceship."

And then when we found that my ship had, while I had been away, sunk into the swamp completely and that we would have to walk the twenty or so miles to Nadia's craft, she laughed even louder. Women do not appreciate destiny.



He floated slowly from his bed towards the window!

ACROSS THE AGES

by DOM PASSANTE

Len was the visionary type of person—and they thought him crazy when he spoke of visiting Mars without a space-ship—then came the call Across the Ages!

AS I RECALL, the business started when Len Brownson, Greg Smith, and I were rooming together in New York. All three of us were in the same line of business—radio and electricity; all of us were pretty much of an age and got along famously together.

Anyway, Greg and I did. We liked baseball and girls—nothing serious though—and the movies and television. . . So did Len Brownson for about a year of our companionship, then the oddest change suddenly came over him.

At the best of times, he was a moody, introspective sort of chap, dark eyed, with a mop of black tumbly hair that was never brought to order. Quite different from Greg and me: we are blue eyed, short necked specimens of the Saxon variety.

I wonder if you have ever come home from a rattling good evening to find a pale-faced, dark young man sitting in the dark before the window, gazing out onto the heavens over the rooftops? Maybe not, but that's the way we found Len on the evening of October 24, 1940. I remember the date well.

Just for a moment, my flesh crawled. The faint light from reflected signs caught the parchment white of Len's skin. His face

looked like that of a ghost. His eyes were black pools against it; his hair had fallen over his forehead. From the way his hands clutched the sides of his chair, I thought for a moment he'd contracted catalepsy or something.

Then, with his usual tactlessness, Greg switched on the lights.

"Say, what the heck's going on in here?" he demanded, flinging his hat up onto the peg back of the door. "Snap out of it, Len! What's the idea of sitting in the dark?"

Len turned ever so slightly to look at us. "Have you never liked to sit in the dark?" he asked. He had a quiet, mellow sort of voice.

"Only when there's a dame with me," Greg grinned, and winked as he glanced across at me. Finally, as silence persisted, he straddled a chair and faced Len directly.

"What's wrong?" he demanded bluntly. "You cried off coming along with us tonight—said you'd work to do. Don't tell me this was it!"

It struck me, standing a bit to one side, that Len did not even hear the question. He was still staring out of the window, way out to where the stars were shining.

"Tonight," he said at last, slowly, "I begin to understand. Just imagine it! The slow procession of the centuries—ages—generations. Countless lives, countless people, and yet—Reincarnation! One day it must come again. That same being must return, to love and live again. Must finish that which was formerly undone. . ."

"Huh?" Greg's face was almost comical in its amazement. "What—what the hell are you raving about, Len?"

He got up, disgruntled, and ambled into the kitchen. I half turned to follow him, then hesitated. I stopped in front of Len and regarded him seriously. After a while, his deep, dark eyes glanced up at me. I admit they gave me a bit of a shock. There was a light in them such as I have never seen before or since—a deep, unearthly light, as though he were looking into things beyond the earthly veil.

"You think I'm crazy, eh?" he asked, smiling faintly.

I shrugged. "I know you're O. K., Len—a regular fellow. . . But I'm a bit puzzled, naturally."

"Sit down a moment." He motioned to Greg's abandoned chair.

"You have a bit more imagination than Greg," he said, as I sat gazing at him. "He's a grand chap, but—well, *you* know! You may understand. . . . *She* is waiting for me. She has been waiting, for tens of thousands of years. I know now that worlds have lived and died while she has waited, locked, at her own wish, deep within her tomb. . ."

I THINK I swallowed something. Certainly I could not speak.

"She knew that one day I would come back," he went on, his voice a droning monotone. "By the law of chance I *must* come back! To think that there could be such a love as hers—that she could wait through endless centuries. Sleeping, not dead—sleeping in the ruins of a world and city that once were great. I know she lives and that her mind is bridging the gulf from her world to Earth. I know because . . . because at last I feel what she is trying to tell me!

"Yes, that is why I am sitting here, concentrating, thinking, brooding. Mentally I can see her, locked in her mausoleum. There is only one way in, and I am the only man who knows that way. But first I must reach her world. . ."

He stopped talking. He was breathing hard from his emotions; a light perspiration had gathered on his face. Greg had come in with an apron tucked by the corners into his waistcoat pockets, two plates in his hands. As he heard the last bit he screwed up his pug nose.

"Say, is this a nut house or an apartment for three electricians?" he demanded.

"Mars. . ." Len breathed. "That is her world."

Dead silence descended on all of us at that. Then, suddenly, Len sprang to his feet, looked at Greg and me with blazing eyes. "Don't you understand?" he demanded, with a desperation that was somehow uncomfortable to witness. "I have to go to Mars—to *her!*"

"Oh, yeah—sure," Greg nodded consolingly, looking at me. "We'll fix it for you all right—same way as they fix Napoleon and Abe Lincoln," he added sourly. "Quit fooling, Len! Supper's nearly ready and—"

"You—you dunderhead!" Len shouted hoarsely, suddenly gripping the astonished Greg by the wrists. "You think this is a *joke?* I mean it—every word of it! You are my friends, the only two in the world who understand me. . . . This is something tremendous, so tremendous I only half un-

derstand it myself. To me has been given a secret—Space-travel!"

"What!" I yelled, jumping up.

"I mean it!" he cried earnestly; and it was comforting to see something of that weird intensity drop from him. "I realized it this evening for the first time. For weeks I've been trying to get it, and now tonight —Came all in a rush! Maybe the conditions were better for telepathy—"

"Telepathy? Space-travel?" Greg's mouth was an O of amazement. "B-but how the heck can we build a space-ship, even if such a thing were possible?"

"Who said anything about a space-ship?" Len snapped.

"You said it, you dope—"

"I said nothing about a ship. I shall reach Mars because no earthly power can hold me back. It is the inevitable law of chance which must operate. Earth is not my real home. I realize it now. I am as inevitably a part of Mars as you two are of Earth. . . . Oh, it's all so complex! If only you'd try to understand."

"I'll say it's complex!" Greg snorted, dumping the plates down. "I think you're plain screwy—'Scuse me, the stew's boiling over."

He dashed back into the kitchen and left me looking at Len in curiosity. Quietly, he laid a hand on my arm.

"Really, it's the truth," he said seriously. "To explain it now with the thing only half done is next to impossible, but I believe there may be a way. Tonight—probably in about six hours—I shall go to Mars. I know that with absolute certainty. Don't be alarmed, Dick—it just has to be. When the adventure is over I'll see to it that you know the whole truth. Somehow I'll get word to you—from Mars."

"You ask me to believe a lot," I muttered. "I guess I'm your friend, and—Well, don't blame me for disbelieving you. It's so crazy!" I insisted. "For instance, what is this law of chance you keep talking about? What the hell *is* it?"

He shrugged. "As near as I can tell you now, it means that if a certain set of conditions, bodily conditions, exactly fit another set of conditions, there must be a dissolution from the state that is wrong to the one that is right. Can you figure that out?"

I scratched my head over it. "Damned if I can!" I said. "Maybe we'll get it clearer when you get to Mars," I grinned.

He did not smile back at me. That light of strange wisdom had come back into his dark eyes. . .

It was like having supper with a ghost that evening. Len hardly said a word as he ate, kept his eyes fixed on the window. He burst once into a frenzy when Greg moved over to draw the shade down. . . . Greg returned to the table with concern written all over his big face. Time and again he glanced at me—but what could I do? I felt just as uncomfortable and uneasy as he did.

We got to bed at last. I had promised myself that I would keep awake and watch for anything that might happen. The three of us had separate beds, Greg between Len and me. I know Len was awake a long time, staring at the sky signs flashing out their incessant glares through the night.

Then I guess I dozed. From remote distances, it seemed, I heard one or two strange noises. I was conscious too of a cold such as I have never known before or since. It felt like solid ice ramming down my back. . . . With a slamming heart I awoke violently.

I saw something I shall never forget—and Greg saw it too.

The pair of us sat shuddering with cold, gazing at the incredible sight of a transparent Len floating slowly from his bed toward the window! He was apparently asleep, motionless with his arms at his sides, bare feet out-thrust from the legs of his pajamas.

In blank horror we waited for the smashing of the window glass—but none came! He went through the solid glass like a wraith. Out, out, over the now darkened roofs toward the pale dawn. . . . We could see him for a while becoming even more transparent. Then he was gone!

And as he went, the fearful cold relaxed. Shaking with fright and reaction, Greg and I fell back onto our beds, too stunned to speak or move.

NATURALLY Greg and I discussed the horrible night for weeks afterward. And we had the practical side to deal with too. At first we got into a pretty stiff tangle with the law trying to explain why Len had disappeared.

Fortunately, he had no parents living, so inquiries from this direction were not forthcoming; but things might have gone badly for us had we not happened on a letter in his desk, in his own handwriting, explaining that he had gone away indefinitely to "ex-

periment." Pretty vague, but since there was no disputing his handwriting after expert study, it put us in the clear again.

Both Greg and I lost something of our liking for pleasures as time went on. We hung around the apartment after our day's work, somehow half expecting Len would reappear. But nothing happened.

We bought astronomical journals and studied up the latest observations on Mars. Again we drew blanks—dry as dust articles, steeped in technicalities, carrying no clues at all. Inwardly, I think, we both bitterly reproached ourselves for the way we'd treated Len on the night of his departure. But after all—! Well, we're only human beings, and he had sounded pretty cock-eyed.

I once thought of writing up the whole truth, as I have done now—but at that time, I had no proof, and so refrained. It is only now, in the light of absolute facts, that I can put the real story together without fear. For at last, after four months of the most dreary winter I have ever known, a message arrived.

We had no idea then *how* it arrived. All we realized was that in an evening in early January, we returned from work to find a curious burnished cylinder lying on the sitting room table. The doors and windows of the apartment had been tightly locked, and our landlady was certain nobody had called, nor had she been up to our apartment all day.

It took us half an hour to get the cylinder unfastened, and out of it sprang a thick wad of heavy, parchment-like manuscript, covered in Len's familiar handwriting. I do not recall clearly what we did. My only recollection is that we pored over that manuscript together while seated on the divan—reading and reading until the fire went out and our eyes ached.

LEN'S STORY

MY VERY dear friends, Greg and Dick [the manuscript ran], I have reached Mars. Let me tell you of the strangeness, the infinite wonder, of my voyage.

I knew when I bade you "Goodnight" that evening that I had also said "Good-by." It was not long before I felt the fast governing compulsion of scientific forces overpowering me. I have a remembrance of risiog from my bed, of a window moving swiftly toward me.

Then there was New York below me, spread out like a map, the rivers shining dull silver. It receded incredibly. I no longer saw a mighty metropolis, but all the continent of America. Then the whole western hemisphere of earth, under its blanket of night.

Outward toward the eternal stars. I was cold, yes, but I only knew it with a certain sense of detachment. I seemed to have no body. I was either a disembodied thought hurtling over the wastes of space, else my body had been forced into complete subjection by my mind. The latter theory I found later to be correct.

The stars, the sun, the moon . . . they were all around me, all save the sun vaguely terrifying in their solitary, inhumanly cold grandeur. For a while I saw and wondered at the titanic prominences of the sun, the unearthly glory of its corona. Then Mars was all that mattered to me in this vast, overpowering universe of powdered stars and cosmic dust—Mars, toward which I was hurtling almost with the speed of thought, faster than light itself. Onwards and onwards, silent and inevitable.

I reached Mars at last. It was night when I arrived. I do not clearly remember the last moments leading up to my arrival. I simply recall that I found myself alone in a waste of reddish desert, standing beside a long dead vegetation-smothered canal. Yes, it was cold—horribly so. The air, too, was thin. But somehow it did not seem to matter. My body was still as adaptable as it had been in space.

And I had my body now because I could see it, but in the process of my journey I had lost my earthly attire. I was stark naked under the stars, a lone being in a graveyard of a world. Horrible, you think? No, not to me. I realized, I *knew*, that I was back on the world where once, very long ago, I had been born. My mind was completely in tune with my surroundings, so much in tune indeed that I experienced but little discomfort from thin air, cold, and light gravity—though after a while, I did collect some of the canal vegetation and fashion it into a rough garment.

Maybe you cannot conceive of an urge greater than life or death itself, an all consuming force? That was what governed me. Food, sleep, rest—they meant nothing. I had to go on and on—to *her!* So I started off.

Perhaps I walked ten miles, fifty, a hun-

dred—I do not know. But I do know that an unerring sense of direction was guiding me. I knew exactly what I expected to see, but when I reached the spot where I expected to see it, there was nothing. No, I am incorrect. There *was* something, like a ghost out of a past age.

Imagine it in the cold, constantly changing light of the two moons of Mars. Imagine those remains of a city—vast columns of naked stone reaching to the heavens, silhouetted against the stars—columns standing alone, the sentinels of a city that had once been great, all that remained of a titanic industry and purpose. A city, a world indeed, defeated by Nature, by lack of water, by crawling rust eating the very heart out of vast machines.

There it lay, the ruins of Ralidon, once master-city of Mars where I had been born. As I walked its somber shadow-ridden recesses, brooded alone in the silence, it came back to me, little by little. I had lived here, yes—a Martian—and between Martians and Earthlings there is little physical distinction. The only difference is that Earthlings are grosser and less intelligent.

I saw her clearly now—tall, young, magnificently blonde, superbly commanding. Womanly indeed. My betrothed. Iana, my beloved. . . . Then what—? Yes! My experiments in the laboratory. Suddenly, the remembrance of a blinding explosion, and darkness. So that was how I had died untold generations before? I had been blown to pieces by an experiment, torn away from my beloved, parts of my disintegrated being hurled in atomic bits into the cosmos.

Swirling, swirling, in the void. A bit here, a bit there. Parts of it on Earth, parts on Mars, parts not united. I lived again, in another body, reincarnated, but with no memory of my past.

YES, I recollected that much as I sat there. The rest I had still to piece together in scientific explanation and order. For the moment, though, only one thing mattered.

Iana still waited, knowing far better than I had done at the time of the explosion, that I must one day come back. She was somewhere near in this buried ruin of a city. Had not her thoughts reached out to me across the gulf? Near—in suspended animation, her body locked but her mind free. Unguessable ages it must have searched for me, until now.

I got to my feet, moved with unerring purpose toward a fallen mass of masonry to the east of the city. Methodically I began to move aside the stones. I worked constantly, without fatigue, until the Martian dawn had come.

By that time, I had pulled aside endless numbers of stones, had raised the heavy slap covering the entrance to the underground mausoleum. On Earth I could not have shifted it. On Mars its weight was just sufficient for me.

Below there weighed an intense and heavy gloom, filled with the moldering odor of age. There were sarcophagi all around me, some of them heavy stone of an early period, others transparent glass-like metal containing still the embalmed bodies of Iana's own ancestors. *They* were embalmed, yes, but she—

At last I saw her, in a transparent coffin isolated from the others. Around its edges, where the glass fitted into sockets, were tiny wire wound coils, glowing softly, still giving off energy that had so long held her in suspended animation.

I do not know how long I stood there contemplating her. She was so incomparably beautiful, so untouched by the ravages of time!—alabaster white, her masses of rippling golden hair flowing down over the whiteness of her pillow. Her hands were folded gently on her breast. She was smiling, ever so slightly.

For a long time, I hesitated over breaking that case, for to do it would mean her dissolution. I would be back again at that moment for which we had both waited so long. No, before I did that I must find a means of projecting to Earth the true story of my experiences. Only then could I feel that I had completely discharged my obligations to Earthly science for them to debate as they might see fit.

The mind of Iana directed me once again. In other quarters of the ruined city, underground, I found writing materials, together with a cylinder able to withstand the ravages of space and land on another world safely. But the complexity of the system of transit! Four-dimensional it was—yes, four-dimensional and controlled by thought waves.

I spent hours pondering it, sitting in the matrix of complicated unaged machinery determining all the mathematical factors for a reintegration of the cylinder on Earth—it was like a problem in television, how to

reassemble the electronic image once it had been transmitted. Hours I spent, thinking, thinking, and thinking. . . . Until at last I was sure that I had mastered the problem sufficiently to project the cylinder not only to Earth, but with a certain mathematical certainty that would bring it right tc my old apartment. Only you can know if I have been successful.

But for the interests of psychical and scientific research I must, I know, explain the scientific reason of my strange adventure.

YOU will know, or at least scientists will, that a given aggregate of molecules and atoms, whether in the form of a man or an inanimate object, can, by the law of chance, break up to re-form one day in exactly the same pattern.

Sir Arthur Eddington has propounded the chances of such a re-formation, admitting that should the chance occur, it was something like 1 plus 27 ciphers to one against it. Remember Sir Arthur's famous simile about monkeys plugging blindly on typewriters being able finally, by the law of chance, to type correctly all the boo s in the Brit'sh Museum? Not through knowledge, but *chance!*

Some of us carry over from a past life the definite memory of an existence gone before. We remember strange people and strange places. There are times when we are sure we have visited a certain place before in some other existence. Such a memory has always been with me—vague, subdued, blotted out by the urgency of events around me, at times—until recently, when I definitely felt telepathic impulses.

Time and again I must have died and lived once more, but by the inevitable law of chance, the atoms that had originally been the Martian began to move nearer and nearer to their original formation. Each one had its own place in the composite that was *me,* but how many bodies I have had, in the interval, I do not know.

At last I was born as Len Brownson of Earth. There indeed was nearly the complete atomic formation I had once had. Daily in our life we lose atoms and pick up others. So it must have been with me. While I was still incomplete in atomic formation, I had only a vague knowledge of a vast might-have-been. But all around me, by mathematical law, those original atoms had drifted toward my one particular gravity. By degrees I picked them up in my daily life, unconsciously, until at last—on that evening when I so startled you—I realized that it was only a matter of hours before the original Martian form I had once would be in being again.

It happened. With what consequence? Surely it is clear? A specific build up of atoms, no matter what the time period in which it occurs, relating to a particular organization of atoms and surroundings, must fit itself *to* those conditions. Nothing I could do could prevent it. I would inevitably return by immutable law to those surroundings where those atoms had formerly been, because they were moulded to the pattern of that particular part of space. . . . Think for a moment of the thousands of people a year who mysteriously vanish. Why? Because they have achieved a condition they possessed ages ago and have suddenly been transported into conditions appropriate to their changed state.

So I came back to Mars, conscious only of the former identity because I was he—am he—again. Only a vague memory of obligations to Earth remain. I know again of my beloved of that other life—Iana, know exactly what to do, because throughout the generations, she, the mistress of science and its laws, knew that one day I *must* return, as all things must return and begin again. The universe itself is a cycle, so is the life within it.

But now I am through. You have the story, the explanation to put on it what construction you will. When I open Iana's case, the artificial conditions in which she has lain so long will cease. In one sweep, time will catch up with itself. With her union with me, the existent atomic frameworks re-formed from the past will shatter and pass away, assume their proper perspective in ageless time.

We shall vanish, only to be born again, together. Why? Because we are now both masters of mind and can control our birth—together, as it should have been so long ago.

The deserts of Mars will be truly empty. The eternal thin winds will sigh over them, carry memories of a former greatness; but for Iana and me, there will be a new beginning.

Good-by, my very dear friends. I go now to fire the cylinder across the void to Earth. When that is done. . . .

Iana!

FUTURIAN TIMES

FUTURE FICTION'S UNIQUE DEPARTMENT

SCIENCE FICTION IN TEXAS

Lilith Lorraine, authoress of "Into the 28th Century," "The Jovian Jest" and others published some years ago, is head of the Avalon Poetry Shrine in Texas. This organization is dedicated to the collecting of all poetry written by contemporary American poets and keeping them on record. Miss Lorraine, a lover of science fiction and fantasy from way back, also heads an stf organization now in the process of taking form.

One of the aims of the Poetry Shrine is to bury a poetry time capsule, to be exhumed in 500 years. Instructions are to be given that the capsule, after exhumation 500 years hence, is to be opened, read, then re-interred with specimens of the year 2441's outstanding poetry.

Miss Lorraine is a fancier of science-fictional and fantastic poetry, as well as that containing "social vision" and "contemporary description," and hopes to include a quantity of today's imaginative imagery output in the capsule. Her favorites in science-fiction poetry include Clark Ashton Smith and Wilfred Owen Morley; she has written a number of such poems herself.

A feature of the burying of the capsule is that everyone present will be permitted to put into the capsule a sealed envelope containing a deposition upon the present. This deposition will have been unread by any save the author, thus a large number of unexpurgated, frank opinions upon the conditions of today will go into the future with samples of the present's foremost American poetry.

Lilith Lorraine's address is Route 8, Box 83-F, San Antonio, Texas.

FAN MAGAZINES

SNIDE, THE THUD AND BLUNDER MAG—Damon Knight, 650 Marion St., Salem, Oregon. 10c per copy. Issue # 2. This is really terrific and must be seen to be fully appreciated. Nothing is sacred to the demon editor, and magazines, stories, authors, and fans all get lampooned right and left. Particularly hilarious is "Via Sweepstakes" by Gordon A. Gillicutty and "Call for Captain Past" (part one) by Gerrod de la Gaetz. Positively recommended.

SOUTHERN STAR—Joe Gilbert, 3600 Grand St., Columbia, S. C. Issue # 2; 10c per copy. This 40-page, mimeographed magazine, devoted to the writings of Southern Fans, is put out by the Columbia Camp, and a right interesting affair it is, too. There is some material by Yankees, of course—"guest material," they term it—but most of it comes from those below the Mason-Dixon line. It's unofficial organ of the Dixie Fantasy Federation, which is trying to enlist southern fantasites into one broad organization. Quite good.

X, THE UNPOPULAR STF REVIEW—Roger Conway, 142 West 103d St., N. Y. C. This item is gratis to all who will exchange publications. Whether or not it is for sale is somewhat uncertain; editions are limited. At any rate, it has a very interesting feature: the entire magazine is editorially written, yet is not the work of the editor. What Conway does is have members of the Futurian Society of New York write articles on various subjects, then he rewrites them in his own style for publication, thus keeping a comfortable veil of anonymity over all. Which, perhaps, is just as well, because some of the items are pretty hot. Recommended if you can take it. (We imagine you can get yourself on the mailing list at 10c per copy.)

BONFIRE—issue # 1. This, the Bulletin of the National Fantasy Fan Federation, is put out by Harry Warner, 303 Bryan Place, Hagerstown, Maryland. Not for sale, but free to all members of the NFFF. First issue contains the federation's constitution, a ballot for the first official election, and explanation by the club's temporary officers, as well as suggestions on procedure by various members. We advise you to drop a card to Warner for info on NFFF if you're a fan so far unconnected with it.

SPACEWAYS—# 21—June 1941—10c per copy from Harry Warner, 303 Bryan Place, Hagerstown, Maryland. This publication has been going since late 1938, and has won a high place in fan esteem, nearly always taking first honors in fan magazine "popularity polls." Current issue contains a well-written article on professional writing, "How to be a Hack," as well as fiction, poetry, and regular features. J. Michael Rosenblum's book reviews are always interesting, the letter section lively, and a column "Beacon Light" by one "Science Fiction Cynic" the identity of which is unknown. (Although rumors and guesses are rife; your editor, among others, has been accused.) All in all, well worth your while.

FANTASY FICTION FIELD ILLUSTRATED NEWS WEEKLY, Julius Unger, 1702 Dahlil Road, Brooklyn, New York. Now the only stf news weekly in existence. By the time you read this, it may be a printed sheet, at 10c per copy, as the editor has plans to that effect in mind. It features photo previews of stf mag covers, photos of fans and their activities, news, chatter, columns, advertisements on back issues of stf mags, and whatnot. All in all, indispensable to any fan.

LE ZOMBIE—Bob Tucker, Box 260 Bloomington, Ill. Stf fun magazine, which has been going for about three years now. No way to describe it unless you've seen a copy or three, then we do not need to. Chance a nickel and sample Tucker's humor.

FANTASITE—# 3, Phil Bronson, 224 West 6th St., Hastings, Minn. Copies at 10c each. This 30-page mag is mimeoed in several colors and a neat, attractive looking thing it is. Of particular interest is "The Science-Weird Controversy" by Carl Jacobi, "Recommended Reading" by Bob Tucker, and reviews of the pro and fan mags by the boys of the Columbia Camp.

FMZ DIGEST—Arthur L. Joquel II, 1426 W. 38th St., Los Angeles, Cal. 5c per copy. This is a digest of all the fan mags, a selection of what, in the editor's opinion, are the outstanding fan articles of the month. There is a good variety of subject-matter and types and, all in all, FMZ Digest is a thing to keep up with. Recommended.



OUT OF NOWHERE

by E. A. GROSSER

(Author of "The Radiant Avenger", "The Psychomorph", etc.)

Valnar, time traveler from nowhere in particular, had raised havoc in plenty the last time he stopped in this continuum; he'd been responsible for the rise of Dodson, the mental dictator who was now menacing the entire planet. So Barlow and Laurine decided that the tourist had better undo it this trip!

DICTATORS are the most naive persons. About all they know are the facts of life. Therefore Great America's Dodson thoroughly approved of a man such as Joel Barlow and a girl such as Laurine Coret walking in the park at twilight. Quite evidently Director Dodson reasoned: Dusk is mysterious . . . Man is curious . . . Q. E. D.—usually.

A civic guard saw them and saluted with a good-natured grin. Wisely, they returned the salute. Then Laurine passed her arm

under Barlow's and sort of cuddled up to him. He straightened and looked at her with surprise.

"Smile, darn you," she grated. "Make it look real—as though you enjoyed it, even if you don't."

His lips stretched into a grimace that in the dusk, passed muster for a smile. And the civic guard smiled fondly after them as they walked along the park path.

"What does Central want me for?" Barlow asked when the guard was beyond earshot.

"The organization is going to hibernate. You're to pass the word along. 'Stay away from headquarters.' "

"Why?"

"Dodson must have managed to get agents into our organization. The New Orleans headquarters was raided during a meeting."

"Did they get them all?" he asked quickly.

She nodded. He said nothing, but his hands closed slowly. They both knew the seriousness of the loss, but still her eyes clung to his face. Director Dodson knew the facts of life.

Suddenly her gaze went over his shoulder and her eyes widened with fright. She turned with a stifled scream and fled. Barlow stared after her with puzzled eyes.

"—me she didn't like," said a rueful voice behind him. "I beg your pardon. I guess it's—"

Barlow turned quickly, but saw nothing. Then, as though someone had switched on a light, there was a violet haze in front of him. And in the middle of the haze was the figure of a man. Then the man and the queer haze disappeared as though the light had been turned off.

A moment later it had returned. "—leave you so abruptly," the figure said, and vanished. A second later it reappeared and said, "I'm sorry I had to—"

Barlow moved away, intending to follow Laurine.

"Don't go," said the queer newcomer. "I think I've settled down, and I want to talk to you."

The haze flickered uncertainly. Barlow's last doubt was removed. He must know how Laurine was faring. But before he could get started, the violet haze and the talking image had returned.

"Hello," it greeted cheerfully. "I'm glad you waited. I've made it at last. Inconvenient—that time-lash."

"Yes," Barlow agreed uncertainly. He stared at the newcomer. The fellow appeared to be an ordinary human being. The violet haze had vanished and in the poor light Barlow couldn't see him very clearly, but it seemed that he was rather tall, strongly built, not too good-looking, and dressed in loose, comfortably fitting clothes. At the moment the newcomer was staring in the direction Laurine had fled.

"Too bad I frightened her," he said with a shake of his head. "She's a cute little trick."

Barlow frowned at the familiarity. "Who are you?"

"Valnar one-oh-oh-three-oh-seven-one-oh-oh—"

"I didn't ask for your telephone number," snapped Barlow. "What's your name?"

"That's it," said the newcomer. "You see, I'm from—well, from the future. I was experimenting with time, and discovered a few of the natural laws that I could control. I constructed this traveller"—He tapped a plaque strapped to his chest. "—and since then I've just been wandering around . . . trying to get back home."

"Lost?" asked Barlow more friendly.

Valnar hesitated. "Well, not exactly. I'm always able to find out where I am, but I can't find my own time. Right now, for instance, figuring from the Birth of Christ as many of the people I've met do, I should be in the year 1974. Is that right?"

"Nineteen seventy-three," Barlow corrected.

The man named Valnar seemed shocked. "Another error," he murmured. "If I don't do better than that, I'm going to find myself out in space, freezing to death."

"I thought you said you were time-traveling," Barlow questioned.

"Certainly," said Valnar. "But traveling in time requires considerable knowledge of astronomy. Both the Earth and the Sun move in space. If I were to travel twenty-four hours into the future, without moving in space, I'd find myself out in the void. But luckily the earth seems to exert an attraction which compensates for numerous errors, though it upsets my calculations concerning the time."

"What time are you from?"

"1974."

"That's next year! That means there are two of you in the world now—that is impossible!"

"No," Valnar disagreed impatiently. "I told you this wasn't my time—maybe I should say, space-time continuum. Time is like a tree with a lot of branches—too damn many of them. In my own time, we calculate that dimension from the Year of the Subsidence. I slid down my branch of that space-time continuum, and now I can't find it again. My people are the descendants of an Atlantean colony established in what you call Florida, but evidently that colony had few chances for survival—perhaps only one. That would make it a single small branch and difficult to find—which it is," he concluded feelingly.

"Then how do you explain your being able to speak English?" Barlow asked, grinning. He was thinking that the stranger was an unconvincing liar.

"This stop is merely incidental. I miscalculated time before last and landed in 1941—met a nice fellow who didn't ask too many questions." He looked severely at Barlow. "*He* believed me right away, taught me English, and told me I was just like someone out of a science-fiction story. Poor fellow was quite worried about some sort of a European menace, though. So I gave him the Mental Ray to protect his—"

"Why, you dirty—" Barlow started forward with swinging fists. He landed one fairly solid blow, then his hands were held powerless in the other's.

"What's the matter with you?" Valnar asked a bit angrily.

Barlow fought to free himself, and couldn't. Valnar was much stronger than he appeared to be. Finally he ceased his struggling, watching closely for a chance, but he didn't stop cursing the newcomer.

"Was that fellow's name Dodson?" he asked at last.

"Why yes," Valnar admitted with surprise. "Then my help was enough to protect this continent. Good!"

"Yeah, 'Good!' " Barlow snarled. "Your 'poor' Dodson protected the American continents, but when he saw that it was so easy, he decided to be a Dictator—only he calls himself, Director." Suddenly Barlow chuckled, "Now Europe is squealing about the 'American Menace.' Don't you think you ought to go over and 'protect' them?"

VALNAR released Barlow and stepped back. "But he didn't seem like that sort of a fellow. He was so—so idealistic!"

"Probably because he didn't have anything to be practical about," Barlow sneered. "Now he's got the Mental Ray you said you gave him, and he controls two continents with absolute power—and is thinking of expanding. The only ones in all the Americas who can even *think* he's wrong are a few like me—ones who for some reason, aren't affected by the ray which orders your thoughts to an approved pattern."

"The dirty heel!" Valnar spat. "I'm going back and kill him. So long!"

"Wait! What good will that do? He's here now, so that proves you didn't kill him. But you caused all this mess; help us free ourselves."

"I can kill him; and I will. I'll create a new branch of the tree—a world where Dodson died right after protecting the Americas."

"But what about this branch!" Barlow shouted as Valnar's hand went to the plaque on his chest. "According to your screwy theory this limb will still be going strong."

Valnar hesitated. "You're right," he admitted, lowering his hand. "We might as well create two new limbs, one right here."

Barlow waited, watching Valnar. Somehow he was impressed by the other. He no longer considered him merely a liar; there *was* something strange about the newcomer. And the circumstances surrounding the discovery of the Mental Ray had never been explained. Dodson was no scientist, and yet he and no other knew the more complicated parts of the powerful electrical broadcaster that matched the thought waves of the people and heterodyned those he considered undesirable.

"I'll have to acquaint myself with the circumstances," said Valnar.

"Okay, what do you want to know?" Barlow offered.

Valnar looked at him slyly. "It would be much more pleasant to learn from that girl you were with. I always try to make my work pleasant."

Barlow made a wry face. "*I'll* help you," he repeated, and wondered why he so instantly rejected Valnar's suggestion.

Valnar shrugged. "Oh, all right. If you insist. But she sure lit out of here in a hurry. Where was she headed?"

"She knew I could run faster than she could, and wanted a headstart," Barlow grinned. "She's probably at headquarters now, getting a bunch to help me."

"Let's go to headquarters," said Valnar.

Barlow looked at him sharply, frowning

with suspicion. "You promised to help," he reminded.

"Oh, you may be sure that I shall," Valnar assured airily. "Lead on, MacBarlow!"

Barlow grunted and started toward the headquarters that he was never supposed to approach. The organization believed in never establishing a personal trail between the various headquarters, and Barlow was a runner. But he considered that the circumstances warranted disobedience.

"Your education was evidently quite sketchy," he grumbled as he led the way. "Dodson didn't give you your money's worth."

TWO BLOCKS from headquarters, Barlow halted suddenly. He was staring at two patrol wagons drawn up in front of the suspiciously unimpressive building that the organization used.

"It's a raid!" he snapped to Valnar.

Two guards came out of the building with a young girl between them. They helped her into the nearest car, even though she fought against it.

"They've got Laurine," Barlow cried, starting forward.

Valnar caught his arm and held him back. "Is that her name?" he asked easily.

Barlow fought to free his arm from Valnar's grasp, but the newcomer was much too strong.

"Come, don't be childish," Valnar reprimanded. "There are too many of them. Don't worry about your friends. We'll free them as soon as possible."

Barlow was undetermined.

"In the meantime, we'll go to see Dodson," Valnar continued.

That settled Barlow's mind. To get near the Director was something that every member of the organization hoped to do. Besides, Laurine and the others would be safe for a while. The "questioning" of the guards always started on a gentle note.

"How will we get to him?" he asked.

"That's up to you," said Valnar. "You get some sort of a conveyance, and I'll construct a small Mental Ray to blackout anyone who tries to stop us."

Barlow took Valnar to the rooms he had engaged and managed to secure the apparatus Valnar declared essential. Luckily it could be made from altered radio parts, the sale of which wasn't restricted. But his own part of the task was harder.

Dodson was one of the first to realize the power of transportation, and held firm control of all its phases. Public conveyances wouldn't serve their purpose because, while Barlow's passports were necessarily in order even though forged, Valnar had none. And no forger was available.

They must steal either an auto or a plane —preferably, a plane. But there was no such thing as a private auto or plane, and the civic conveyances were carefully controlled.

Finally Barlow had to admit defeat and return to his rooms. He went in wearily and sat down. Valnar greeted him cheerfully.

"It's finished," he said, waving to the small assembly on the table.

Barlow peered at it. "I failed," he admitted. "Couldn't steal one anywhere."

"Then we'll get one with this," said Valnar.

Barlow thought of his wearying hours of search and felt like slugging the other. But he knew that Valnar would win any scrimmage, so he regretfully discarded the idea.

"Then we might as well free Laurine and the others before we take off," he suggested.

Valnar's eyes glowed with interest. "Good idea!" he approved. "I was thinking that we'd need help."

The city prison was a grim structure. It contained few people, but those it did swallow were seldom heard of again. Barlow felt a tightening of his muscles as they approached.

Valnar was carrying the ray projector. He walked along confidently, with an unserious buoyancy like that of a person engaged in a game with children. Barlow envied him.

He was well aware of what they were fighting. And the thought that possibly the projector wouldn't work, made him feel hollow. The guards at the entrance stepped forward to bar the way.

Valnar's fingers switched on the projector and he swept it over the two guards. They dropped their rifles and slumped to the stone entranceway. Barlow picked up their rifles, then stared at them. They were sleeping peacefully.

Valnar strode into the building, applied the ray to another man, and entered the warden's office. The warden leaped to his feet angrily.

"We want the prisoners brought in yesterday," Valnar informed.

"Shoot, Perkins!" cried the warden.

BARLOW wheeled, rifle ready. A secretary that they hadn't noticed at the other end of the room was leveling a pistol. Barlow moved the rifle swiftly, but Valnar was the swifter and the secretary lay back in his chair and went to sleep.

"The prisoners, please," Valnar insisted.

"I—I can't," said the warden, sitting down weakly.

"You better," Barlow advised.

"They were taken to Washington this morning at the orders of the Director."

Valnar switched on his projector again and the warden fell forward on his desk, snoring. Barlow urged Valnar toward the elevator that would take them to the roof.

"A police plane will do fine," he said. "And they are fast. We've got to get to Washington in a hurry."

"Is that where Dodson is?" Valnar asked as they shot upward while the elevator operator snored peacefully in a corner.

"Yes, and God only knows what he intends to do to Laurine and the others."

The elevator halted at the roof and Barlow faced Valnar. "Can you spread that beam to get everybody up here?" he asked. "Then they won't follow, or radio ahead to have us intercepted."

"Sure thing," Valnar said, motioning for Barlow to open the door.

Barlow pulled the sliding door aside, and Valnar stepped outside with the projector running. He swept the roof quickly and smiled with satisfaction to see the uniformed men fall.

Barlow chose the newest of the planes ready on the roof and helped Valnar inside the cabin. Then he climbed inside himself and found Valnar staring at the controls with offended eyes. He turned to Barlow.

"Can you fly this thing?"

"I was in the Air Guards before they discovered that I was an Unamenable," Barlow answered with a smile. He started the motor, waited until the nearly silent hum of power had reached a constant pitch, then sent the plane into the air.

"Why do you have so many instruments?" Valnar demanded. "Doesn't Dodson know that the acme of science is simplicity—beautiful simplicity? This plane has ten times as many instruments as my time-traveler. It's foolish and confusing."

"I didn't make it," Barlow disclaimed. "But then you got to remember that you've been making errors in your calculations. Maybe you need a few more instruments."

Valnar said nothing. For several minutes he was silent, then when he did speak, the subject was entirely different. "What did you mean—'Unamenable'?"

"That's Dodson's name for those who aren't affected by the Mental Ray. I guess you're one, or you wouldn t be helping me."

Valnar shook his head. "Never heard of it," he declared. "The ray affects me all right, but I only gave Dodson a low-power version of this," he signified the set he had constructed, "and I am able to compensate for the effect."

IT WAS late evening when they sighted the lights of Washington. Barlow sent the plane down over an arterial highway that stretched in the night like a glowing worm. He hovered noiselessly above it until he was sure that there were no cars in sight, then landed.

"Why don't we go on?" Valnar asked.

"Dodson has forbidden planes to fly over Washington, and there are anti-aircraft batteries permanently on duty to enforce the order."

Valnar grumbled, but helped Barlow send the plane into a field near the road, where it would not immediately be seen. They walked into the little suburban town. It took only a short time to find an automobile, but when they started away in it, the owner came running out of a tavern, shrieking for the police. Valnar lifted the projector and removed the man's objections and they sped on toward the White House.

The closer they came to the symbol of government, the more doubtful Barlow became. It had all been too easy. Through years he had been conditioned to a powerful, almost omnipotent government that struck back savagely at the least resistance. And now he was nearing the nervous center of that government in an automobile! Like any government-approved and personally curious tourist. It almost made him feel guilty.

The guards at the entrance of the drive halted them. Valnar lifted the projector confidently and the men slumped to the pavement. Barlow got out and dragged them aside and opened the gates, then sent the car up the drive.

He halted at the entrance at Valnar's direction. Valnar climbed out of the car with Olympian confidence as a pair of guards barred the way and an officer stepped forward to question them.

"Your names, gentlemen?"

Barlow followed Valnar out of the car and watched Valnar thumb the switch of the projector. The beam swept over the three soldiers. And nothing happened. Valnar passed the beam over them again and still nothing resulted. The two at the doorway still barred the way and the officer smiled grimly.

"Your names are unnecessary," he said. "We have been waiting for you." He waved to someone in the darkness.

Barlow turned and saw a full squad with leveled rifles. There was no chance to get the two rifles he had brought with them. There was no chance for any sort of a fight. They were trapped as completely as rats in a wire cage.

Valnar seemed paralyzed. He didn't seem to realize that he had been vulnerable. He made no resistance when the officer took the projector from his hands. He stared at Barlow dazedly.

"The Director will see you," the officer said to Valnar, then turned to look at Barlow. "You must be Barlow," he mused. "Put him with the rest. The Organization will be liquidated tomorrow."

BARLOW was escorted to prison by two watchful soldiers. He was silent. The abrupt failure had stunned him, and he knew that it was no use to appeal to his guards. With them Dodson was not a ruler; he was a messiah. The Mental Ray effected that in the common man. They might be pretty decent fellows with wives and families and friends, but on that one point they were adamant and inviolable.

He was quickly booked, then taken down the corridor between the cells. He was thrust into the largest cell, the tank, and heard the door close behind him with dreadful finality.

"Barlow!" came a surprised shout from one of the men in the crowded cell.

Barlow focused his eyes on the face of the man who came forward, and saw that it was the chief of Laurine's group. Then there was a flurry of movement among the captives and a girl ran to his arms. Her face was tear-streaked and her voice unsteady.

"Joel! I hoped that they wouldn't get you." She was crying again, softly, face hidden against his chest.

He stroked her hair slowly. "Don't cry, Laurine," he said dully as he looked around. There were many whom he didn't recognize, but among the half hundred in the cell he recognized all those of Laurine's group that he had met. He looked at the leader questioningly.

"A clean sweep," said the leader. "And not only of our group, but of every one in the country. The prisons are full, overcrowded. We know that nearly every man of our group was captured, and the others report the same for their groups. The Organization is through."

"They must have got lists of members," Barlow mumbled.

"How could they?" the leader demanded. "Nothing like that exists. We never kept any records. No! It was spies. They may even have got into the organization. Laurine tells me of something strange that made her return to headquarters to get help for you. What was it?"

Laurine had ceased her weeping, but she still clung to him. And Barlow felt an inner happiness for her closeness. He held her in his arms while he told the leader all that had happened to him. When he was through he expected them to feel as he did, that the disaster had struck them at the very moment when success seemed within their grasp. But instead they were staring at him pityingly.

"What's the matter?" he asked hesitantly.

Laurine lifted her head from his chest and freed herself of his arms. In her eyes too, there was pity. But there was also anger.

"You fool!" she cried. "That must have been the spy."

Barlow was stricken dumb for a minute. Then he shook his doubts from his mind. "No! Valnar wanted to help us."

The leader pressed his shoulder with a smile, "No, son," he said, shaking his head slowly. "He must have been a spy. That story of time-traveling—" He left the sentence uncompleted and the incompleteness only showed more starkly the absurdity of Valnar's tale.

Barlow felt the strength flow from his body. He felt old, tired. All that they had fought for was gone. This was the world's last chance at freedom. All the Unamenables were gathered together for death and there would be no more differences of opinion. The only opinions in the Americas would be those of Director Dodson. And soon his will would be the only power in the world. In his mind's eye he

seemed to see man marching through time in a long hopeless column, never progressing, always regressing, without the yeast of the fighting minority. He turned away from those eyes of his companions, those eyes that told him that he had had the chance to avenge this betrayal and had failed.

Laurine's hand went to his shoulder and rested there lightly to comfort him. He covered her small hand with his own large one. Then she was standing beside him. His arm was over her shoulders and she was smiling up at him.

"Any one of us would have done the same, Joel," she said softly.

He smiled bitterly. "If so, we don't deserve to win. We're too damn dumb!"

She said nothing, but remained quietly at his side. And he became aware now that he was to lose his life, that it could have been much sweeter if he hadn't been so blind. He cursed Valnar under his breath.

But Laurine heard him. "All you missed was a chance to avenge us," she said. "The Organization was already doomed."

The anger and disgust left him and he waited with a quiet acceptance. There seemed to be no hope. But he was determined to wait, and watch.

THE MORNING was a gray, dull-humored thing. There was no cheer in the large cell. They waited silently.

It was still early when guards came into the prison. They marched down the corridor in perfect discipline. Their weapons were well kept and ready.

"Empty the tank, first," commanded the officer.

The door of the large cell opened, but there was no chance to fight or escape. The prisoners filed out, formed ranks, then, surrounded by guards, marched to the prison courtyard.

Barlow and Laurine had managed to stay together and as they left the prison, her hand slipped into his. He thought it possible that she was afraid. But when he looked at her, her shoulders were back and her eyes bright. He pressed her hand.

"Look, Joel," she directed in a whisper when they halted in the courtyard. She nodded her head toward a richly dressed group near the outer entrance.

Joel Barlow looked and saw the well-publicized features of Director Dodson in the middle of the group. And close by the Director was Valnar.

But Valnar was heavily guarded. His clothes were torn and the plaque which he had always worn, was gone. And he had lost his confident bearing.

Their eyes met across the courtyard. Barlow saw Valnar smile, lift his hand in greeting, but he showed no acknowledgement. Valnar's face showed puzzlement.

The prisoners were lined against the wall. The guards withdrew to one side and stood at attention. Director Dodson motioned negligently with one hand, and Valnar and his guard crossed to the prisoners. Valnar was placed with the prisoners and the guard withdrew.

Barlow stared at Valnar. Then he looked down to meet Laurine's eyes.

"They're going to kill him too," he said. "He wasn't a spy."

She didn't answer.

Barlow turned again to Valnar, called to him, "I see you're still with us."

"To the end—maybe it won't be so bitter," Valnar grinned. "Get in there and fight when the time comes."

Barlow had no chance to ask for an explanation. One of the officers with Dodson stepped forward. He carried the projector Valnar had constructed, but it was changed and was mounted on a tripod. The officer trained it on the prisoners and pressed the switch.

Barlow felt a nervous shock that was almost electrical. He stiffened spasmodically. He suddenly felt a hundred times stronger than he had been, and felt a stinging contempt for the sheep around him. Rage welled into his mind like a hot acid burning away all but the desire to fight and kill.

As through a red haze he saw Valnar collapse limply to the ground. But the other prisoners were standing rigidly, faces twisted with hate. He leaped forward.

"Come on, you yellow-bellied cowards! What the hell does it matter if they have all the guns? Maybe we can get a couple of them anyway!"

A hoarse roar of approval came from the throats of those behind him. Laurine was at his side and they were running toward the group of rulers. And behind came the others of the Organization, a blood-hungry, hateful rabble. Unfearful of death and desiring only to tear the flesh of the Director's men from their bodies.

Then a volley from the massed guards struck into them. Barlow felt something strike him on the side. He staggered and almost fell as a burning thread of agony lanced through his body. But the rage upheld him, made him fight on.

Others passed him. Laurine ran ahead. He fell to the ground, then fought his way to his hands and knees and crawled toward Dodson and his subordinates. He saw Laurine leap at the men at the projector. They went to the ground, fighting and kicking in utter disregard of all rules.

The bullets of the guards were dropping men and women all around him. Many struggled up to fight their way onward, but many stayed down.

Barlow reached the projector, grasped the tripod to lift himself up. He saw dimly that Dodson and his officers were clamoring at the gate to be freed from the bloody courtyard, but the portals had been closed to retain the prisoners and now did as well for the Director.

Weakly, Barlow turned the projector around. He had to lean over it to stay up, but he threw its beam over those at the gate. They went down like dead men, slow and easily. Then the guards, then. . .

The rage was leaving him. Blackness was closing in around his mind. He sagged over the projector, and dragged it to the ground with him.

THE BLACKNESS around his mind first parted to allow a tiny pricking of pain to dart into his mind. Then, as though the neural dams had broken, agony came. He twisted to escape it, and from far away a voice spoke soothingly.

The agony faded slowly and he became conscious of light. He saw a white-garbed figure near him. The face was pretty and feminine, and in the woman's hand was a hypodermic syringe. His mind cleared slowly and he saw more clearly. He was in a hospital.

He turned and saw Laurine and Valnar standing at the other side of the bed. Laurine's hand was bandaged and her face scratched but otherwise she seemed uninjured. She smiled at him.

"That was close," said Valnar and Barlow looked at him. The strange man had entirely recovered his good humor and confidence. Barlow saw that he was again wearing the plaque.

"Did we all go crazy?" Barlow asked.

"Just a bit more than usual," Valnar grinned. "I got to thinking about what you told me about the Unamenables, and came to the conclusion that the Mental Ray only controlled the average person. Those who varied from the norm, either above or below, were affected differently. To them it was an irritant. Haven't you ever thought it odd that all the Unamenables fought Dodson?

"So when we were captured because the warden reported our visit, I agreed to help Dodson. He had scientists, anyway. They sure blanked the projector that night. Dodson wanted me to make the projector deadly. I did, then Dodson was quite amused when I suggested that he try it out on you Unamenables. But instead of killing you, it aroused you to intense activity. The only thing that went wrong was that Dodson crossed me, and the ray was too strong for me to compensate. I was laid out cold."

"We've won, Joel," Laurine interrupted. "Dodson is dead. And we've released all the members from the prisons, and destroyed the transmitters."

"Yeah," agreed Valnar. "My job here is done, so I'll be getting along. I want to kill Dodson again, this time personally."

Barlow forced Laurine to sit on the edge of the bed. Then held her hand to make sure that she stayed there, and faced Valnar.

"Why don't you stay here?" he asked.

Valnar shook his head. "I got to see about getting home," he said, starting to go. "So long."

"Wait!" called Barlow. "Where are you going this time?" he asked when Valnar halted. "All the way back to the beginning?"

"I've already been there," said Valnar. "That was my first trip. I had a car then, but the elemental chaos ruined it and I was barely able to get away in time."

A sudden thought struck Barlow. He grinned at Valnar.

Valnar frowned and demanded, "Well?"

"Remember your simile of time to a growing tree with a lot of branches?"

Valnar nodded and waited.

"And remember how you said that you were creating new branches every time you stopped?"

"Uh-huh," Valnar grunted impatiently.

"Well, I'll bet you haven't been sliding up and down the branches of that tree at all. You've been leaping from one to another like a monkey. And you weren't in your own past before you started, so you

can't be now. You aren't in your own time at all. When you leaped back to elemental chaos, you planted this tree. You're climbing around the wrong tree, fella."

Valnar started, then stared. "I guess I'll stay here for a while after all," he muttered as he turned and went out.

Laurine was watching Barlow. "You were trying to sell him something then," she accused.

"Sure," he admitted easily. "Think of the world-limb we can build if he stays with us." He laughed and drew her face down to his.

DENVER CONVENTION TERRIFIC

Over 100 fans and professionals, the latter of which included Future Fiction's Hugh Raymond, Martin Pearson, Willard E. Hawkins, Lee Gregor, Edmond Hamilton, C. B. Conant, Don Wollheim (our rival), and your editor, gathered at the Hotel Shirley-Savoy in Denver over the 4th, 5th, and 6th of July to attend the third world science fiction convention.

Guest of honor was Lt. Robert A. Heinlein, USN (retired) and his wife Leslyn. Lt. Heinlein delivered an inspiring and thought-provoking address on July 4th, "The Discovery of the Future." A banquet in honor of the Heinleins closed the proceedings on July 6th.

We haven't the space to go into full details here (you may see more about it in our next issue) but we'll just say that the costume ball was glorious, the auction thrilling, the business meeting stimulating, and the job that the Convention Committee (Olon F. Wiggins, Roy Hunt, and Lew Martin) did in arranging the affair was excellent. And orchids to Walt and Eleanor Daugherty, who not only chose the Denvention for their honeymoon spot, but also recorded all the speeches on permanent records! (The Daughertys are from Los Angeles, where next year's convention will be held.)

We were especially happy to see with what eagerness the fans bid for the Paul covers Future Fiction donated, as well as the Bok, Paul, and Dolgov originals.

Among the "greats" in fandom who attended were Forrest J. Ackerman, Morojo, Paul Freehafer, T. Bruce Yerke, Frank Brady, Dale Hart, Art Widner, Milton A. Rothman, Julie Unger, Damon Knight, Erle Korshak, J. J. Fortier, Cyril Kornbluth, John B. Michel, Chester Cohen, E. E. Evans, and many others—to publish their names would be to list active fandom! Congratulations from Future Fiction to everyone who helped make the Denvention a success! We had a swell time!

FORBIDDEN FLIGHT

by Chester B. Conant

A Future Fiction Brief

BUT FOR the internal sounds of the ship hurtling through space the silence was complete. It was not long since they had left Earth on their perilously romantic expedition. In the enforced inactivity aboard ship, the half-dozen members of the crew were reliving the events of the past few months, particularly that final meeting of the Junior Rocketeers, an organization of younger space pilots, most of them still in their twenties. The society had been organized late in the 21st Century by the Board of Interuniversal Transportation, Youth Commission, to interest the space-conscious youth of the World in "the furthering of scientific expeditions to planets yet unexplored to extend the knowledge of man." Into this organization had poured young men and women from all walks of life interested in making their hobby of rocketing important as an aid to scientific advancement.

Its success was attested by the fact that the Tellurian Army of Maintenance consistently recruited officers from its membership to be trained as assistant commanders of its extraplanetary forces.

"I AM here, Friends, to plead the cause of sanity," Dr. Henry Neist began. Hurt eyes stared at the speaker with disappointment and astonishment. The doctor paused. For a moment, he had the feeling that they hadn't heard, so stunning was the silence. The members of the Jun-

ior Rocketeers were thinking, trying to understand, since Dr. Neist was their last hope of official sanction. This same Dr. Neist had been their greatest supporter before and during their many previous expeditions, had helped them, lending his time and patience, even when all others had forsaken them. He had stood as a bulwark for them against the sneering disapproval of the World, the only member of the Board of Interuniversal Transportation who had aided them, fighting with them and for them to the last.

Now he was standing there on the platform with the others—against them. Small wonder it was difficult for them to follow his words, to comprehend his meaning. He fully realized their disappointment and it was only painfully that he continued.

"In the past I have worked with you side by side against a world of doubters and scoffers." He was reading their thoughts. "But I cannot support you in this endeavor. I wish I could..." Dr. Neist paused resignedly. "I'm not thinking of myself, Friends, believe me. The thought of exile to the barren Anos does not frighten me as it hasn't in the past. Twelve of your associates have disappeared — perished — in flights of exploration to Uranus. Yes, surely perished, for if they were alive we should most certainly have heard from them. We are no longer living in the experimental era of the 21st Century. Space travel is an accomplished fact. We have almost completely conquered space. But for a few unexplored, outlying planets, we should have complete knowledge of what was once a great, mysterious universe.

"With such knowledge, Friends, with interuniversal communications perfected, can you still believe that twelve young people could become so lost in space that it were impossible for them to phone us? Think! They had two complete auxiliary sets of uniphones with which they could contact any planet in our universe. The sets were in perfect condition, had been checked

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and rechecked. Could there have been an accident so inconceivable as to have ruined their phones and left their ship damaged beyond repair? The Staluminum hulls must have been crushed—destroyed—before their instruments could even be touched.

"The two previous expeditions to Uranus have failed horribly, as never before in this century of enlightenment and research. The second expedition should never have been allowed, yet you ask for a third. It's sheer suicide, Friends—sheer suicide. Don't you see that? . . . I cannot give you my sanction." The last with a definite finality, almost fatalistic in tone. The lines in Dr. Neist's face deepened; he looked like a tired old man as he sank into his seat. He felt their disappointment keenly; perhaps as much as they did themselves.

But the Junior Rocketeers did not realize this at the time. Neist's decision meant the abandonment of an expedition of months of planning, during which they had hardly slept, working night and day to bring their venture to a successful conclusion.

Disconsolately, they trouped out of the hall, hardly speaking. One boy, Reggie Bowan, much younger than his fellows, who had joined the organization hardly a month previously, wiped tears from his eyes as he walked. He expressed the feelings of his dry-eyed but as fully affected seniors.

That night they met in their spacious quarters which were at once laboratory, hangar and factory, wherein they had planned and built the ships which had carried their members to glory on the many expeditions since the inception of their organization only a quarter-century before.

"Are all the entrances being carefully watched?" asked Jason Day. "You haven't forgotten the East Office? The Doctor usually enters from there. We can't trust anyone now."

"The East Office also, Friend Jason—Rita's guarding it." Jason Day was local president of the society. Without turning his long dark face, he assented,

"Good. We must work fast, now, and with all possible caution. The Quest has been checked a hundred times; almost everything is ready. I assume you've all had your quota for the evening meal. Dinner is the last meal you'll get on Earth. We'll breakfast on the ship."

Little more than an hour later, the great roar of the Starterocket tubes announced the beginning of the outlawed excursion. Having succeeded in catapulting their burden into space, the incipient rockets now settled down, smouldering, to rest. A thick, black smoke hid them from view.

"Starterockets cleared, Friend Jason," announced young Bowan. No tears now. The lad's face was beaming with a mixture of happiness and perspiration as he awaited further instructions. Jason threw the switch that started the ship's rocket engines almost before the boy's words were finished.

Blanche Holm, the pretty co-pilot, bustled about getting things in readiness for the long, forbidden journey. Humming happily, she set gears and levers in preparation for her turn at the controls. Rita Balter, the only other girl aboard ship, was unpacking and re-packing tools and gear while others were similarly occupied in the after-compartments of the Quest.

IN HIS observatory, where he had paced the floor ceaselessly all night, Dr. Neist watched with deep emotion as the Rocketeers sped into the infinite. Painted along the ship's side in ragged blue he had read: URANUS OR BUST. He smiled sadly at their youthful exuberance. The young fools . . . He knew they'd do it. Those old fossils on the Board must have been mad to think they were going to give up the idea after these exhaustive weeks of careful planning. He wished they had. Jason Day was his favorite protege: brilliant, ambitious—they were all a lot of fine kids. He shrugged his shoulders wearily. . . .

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A GLEAMING bronze bullet sped smoothly through space, seeming to nose into the very stars. Inside the bullet Jason was getting ready to take his turn at the controls. He found Blanche weary yet cheerful, looking forward to a rest in the sleeping quarters.

"Look at the indicator, Blanche!" he cried. The needle was quivering madly. "We're nearing it!"

"I know," she replied. "I've been watching it all night. It's been motionless until now. We must just have entered the range of its magnetic field."

"I'll take over," Jason said, excitedly. "You'd better get some sleep."

"I can't sleep now. Let me have a stimulette, will you? I've used all mine."

"Sure... here." He handed her a capsule. "Blanche—?"

"Yes?"

"I'm thinking it wasn't far from here—"

"Yes, Jay, I know. We'll find out soon enough."

"Perhaps too soon. Blanche, you know how I feel about you."

"Of course."

"Maybe we should have married before we left."

"Why so pessimistic, darling? This isn't like you."

"I don't know." He forced a laugh. "Maybe it's the atmosphere."

It was at that moment, peering through the obsoglass in front of him, that he saw it.

"Blanche! Look at that!"

In front of them and a few short miles above them stretched a high fuzzy blanket of haze. Beyond it the torn and twisted remains of the ships of the two previous expeditions, a gruesome chaos of almost unrecognizable wreckage. All this could be seen but dimly through the yellow film.

A moment more and they would pierce the blanket. A feeling of impending doom seized them. Horror-stricken, they huddled together, the instruments and dials now for-

gotten. The indicator which warned them of their approach had long since burst into fragments, the magnetic pull on the great needle too much even for the duraglass shield to withstand.

The Quest pierced the yellow haze. There was a terrific explosion. Great forces, like unseen hands, tore at the ship, rending the strong Staluminum hull to fragments as though it were an eggshell. When the last fragments had come to rest there was nothing to be seen of the former occupants but a few crimson splotches here and there, scattered about the wreckage.

Only one huge Staluminum plate which had been thrown clear of the ship at the beginning of the explosion remained recognizable. Still legible on one side of the bronze-hued plate were two words:—OR BUST.

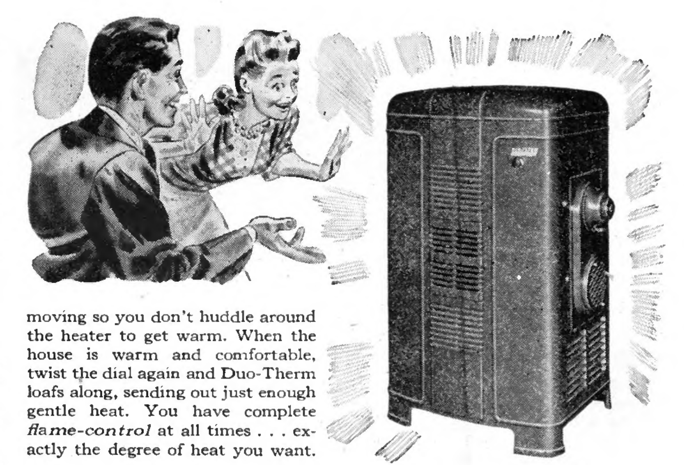


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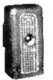
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